



# Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social and economic conditions downtown

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

### Leveraging existing events to draw visitors

The Downtown Windsor Business Improvement Association has been exploring ways that the annual Windsor ComiCon, launched in 2015, can benefit downtown merchants. The event sees hundreds of comic lovers, often in elaborate costumes, descend on The Colosseum at Caesars Windsor in Ontario, Canada (est. pop. 210,891), but getting them out of the Colosseum and into downtown restaurants and businesses has proven difficult.

In the inaugural year, the BIA provided financial support to the event. In the second year, the organization hosted a ComiCon-themed pub crawl. This year, the BIA went all-in with the Windsor ComiCon Experience, offering multi-site activations at downtown businesses during hours that complimented those of the main ComiCon event.

“A great deal of ComiCon takes place inside the casino, and draws a number of visitors from this region and beyond,” says Debi Croucher, the BIA’s executive director. “We wanted to extend that experience into the city center, and allow our businesses to participate, as well.”

The BIA developed a number of very specific activities that would engage ComiCon guests and invited downtown businesses to act as hosts. The activities included:

- **Artist’s Café.** This Friday early-evening event “will celebrate the rich culture and heritage of our local comic artist community,” proposed the BIA. The host business had to ensure that at least one local comic artist would be on hand to provide an educational/inspirational session, and provide each artist with \$100

in cash or gifts, while also providing refreshments for up to 30 guests.

- **Night of Heroes.** This Friday evening event, from 8 p.m. to midnight, “will celebrate the rich culture and heritage of the regional costume cosplayer community,” the BID said. Multiple businesses were invited to combine on this costume party for those 19 and older, if desired. The hosting business was required to provide refreshments and giveaways for the cosplay group, and \$200 in cash or in-kind for use by Windsor ComiCon.

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- **ComiCon After Dark Party.** From 9 p.m. on Saturday to 2 a.m. on Sunday, the host business for this party would see the show’s premiere afterhours event at a downtown location, featuring opportunities for show guests, staff, sponsors, VIPs, volunteers, BIA staff, and others to mingle with ComiCon celebrities — however, the BIA and ComiCon did not guarantee any specific appearances. The host business was required to provide a venue for up to 150 people, with a primary designated space for ComiCon celebrities, staff, and VIPs, and a secondary designated space for general patrons, refreshments and other provisions for the ComiCon-connected attendees, a drink special for patrons, and a contribution of \$500 to Windsor ComiCon.

- **Volunteer Recognition Celebration.** This Sunday evening event required the host to provide a venue for 60 people, a designated space for volunteers, refreshments and giveaways for the volunteer

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Reprinted from the November 2017 issue of *Downtown Idea Exchange*  
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group, and a contribution of \$200 in cash or in-kind for use by Windsor ComiCon to award to volunteers.

In return, hosting businesses were offered a wide variety of benefits based on the level of their participation. These included use of a hybrid event logo, having their own brand logo and URL featured on the ComiCon website, opportunities to market their Experience event directly to ComiCon guests, and from two to eight weekend passes to Windsor ComiCon.

• **Additional Opportunities.** The RFP also invited other businesses to host ComiCon celebrities, with fees and benefits to be determined.

The Artist's Café, Night of Heroes, ComiCon After Dark Party, and Volunteer Recognition Celebration were embraced by downtown businesses and organizations.

"We got a lot of interest, but not a lot of submissions," says Croucher. "We put it out with too short a notice. The event was two weeks out. Also, depending on what that Experience was, it really limited some of the engagement for particular types of establishments. Only one pertained to coffee shops, and only a couple were nightclub related, and with some, the size of the event limited the number of merchants."

However, the Windsor ComiCon Experience has been deemed a success, and demonstrated an interest and an appetite for downtown experiences. Next year, the RFP will go out earlier, and will propose a broader range of Experiences, says Croucher.

"The response was fantastic in terms of the merchants that did participate and the interest from others," she says. "It went really, really well, and provided a number of opportunities to mix and mingle with other folks that share the same interest, and to meet celebrities and special guests. It was also an economic driver in terms of the businesses that participated, and in terms of raising their profile in the community and beyond. It was a really nice opportunity to showcase our membership and encourage repeat visitations."

Enticing ComiCon guests into the downtown benefited businesses not participating as part of the Experience, as well. "It increased pedestrian footfall, for sure," says Croucher. "And they might be going to

the Artist's Café, but see a record store or retailer they didn't know existed, so end up stopping by there, as well. It also encouraged folks to stick around a little longer, maybe for dinner and then another event."

Windsor ComiCon handled all of the marketing and promotion. "We did a buy on social media, but the Windsor ComiCon had a real stronghold in terms of local and regional media and spreading the word," Croucher says. The events were also promoted via the BIA's "significant database" via social media and email.

This program demonstrates the value of building on externally produced events, Croucher says. "It was a great idea and a lot of fun. We've noticed with other events where we have external organizers, visits are specific to the location the event is being held at and we, as a city, don't really engage folks coming into town for those. This was a really neat opportunity to test the waters, and it has shown that there is an appetite and a huge opportunity for spin-off events.

For organizations wishing to explore this concept, Croucher advises establishing a relationship with the external event organizers as early as possible, if not with financial support, then with an offer of in-kind support such as promotion, volunteers, etc.

"We had a really good connection with the organizers of the ComiCon, and that was imperative," she says. "I believe this was something that they wanted to explore. Now they can take that and do it in other municipalities. The Downtown Windsor Experience was a showcase for them which can be built upon and, depending on who they are engaging with, could be a revenue opportunity for them, too."

And just as ComiCon may take the extended experience concept to other municipalities, the BIA plans to apply the concept to other large annual events in Windsor, Croucher says.

Also be sure to get exclusivity for event-themed offerings downtown. "Once the word got out, quite a few private clubs wanted to jump on the band wagon, but we had exclusivity," says Croucher.

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