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The History and Future of Toronto's Business Improvement Areas (BIAs)

A Made-in-Toronto Idea

Toronto is the birthplace of something that has now spread across the globe: the Business Improvement Area (BIA). The idea started more than 50 years ago in **Bloor West Village**, when local shopkeepers realized they were losing customers to shiny new suburban malls. Instead of competing alone, they decided to work together. Their vision was simple but powerful: if every business chipped in a little, the community could invest in things like events, beautification, and marketing that would bring people back to the main street.

With the support of the City of Toronto and the Province of Ontario, new legislation was written, and in 1970, the **Bloor West Village BIA** became the very first business area to launch with an official mandate - a first of its kind in the world. What started as a local solution quickly became a model that other neighbourhoods, and eventually cities around the world, wanted to adopt.

Building a Movement

By the early 1980s, Toronto had about 20 BIAs, including the iconic first five: Bloor West Village, Junction Gardens (The Junction), Lakeshore Village, Cabbagetown and the Kingsway. These neighbourhood organizations created farmers' markets, hosted parades, organized festivals, and worked on streetscape projects to make their areas more welcoming. It was grassroots energy at its best, with local entrepreneurs joining forces to strengthen their communities and foster a sense of local economic and social wellbeing.

But the idea wasn't always easy to defend. Some businesses didn't want to pay the mandatory levy, and critics questioned whether BIAs were necessary. That's when Alex Ling became the face of the movement. As John Kiru, TABIA's CEO, recalls, *"He would shut his store down, go to council or city committee, and defend the BIA from legal and political challenges. Effectively, he incubated the BIA movement allowing it to grow into the global model for community-driven economic development that it is today."*

Ling also realized BIAs would be stronger if they stood together. So, in 1982, he helped launch what would later become the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA). While TABIA didn't officially incorporate until 2002, it had been working behind the scenes for years, supporting BIAs, speaking up at City Hall, and ensuring the model survived.

The Rules That Shaped BIAs

The legislative framework that created BIAs in 1970 is still in place today, while embedded in the Ontario Municipal Act, Toronto's BIA mandate rests within the City's Chapter 19. While the

legislation and Toronto Act gave the BIAs their start, it hasn't changed much in over five decades. *"Today we're still fundamentally dealing with a 55-year-old piece of legislation... Consumer habits and the way people do business have changed significantly, but BIAs are restrained by not having the flexibility they need to adapt to today's unique challenges,"* explained Kiru.

This means BIAs are often limited in how creative they can be. Despite being made up of entrepreneurs with the spirit of innovation, boards of BIAs sometimes feel stuck playing it safe instead of experimenting with new ideas.

What's Next: BIAs as Incubators

The next big step for BIAs is to think of themselves not just as promoters of main streets, but as **incubators** for the next generation of entrepreneurs and **designers** of modern business communities. That could include opportunities like:

- Owning or leasing property so they can attract the right mix of businesses for their community.
- Helping new business owners learn the ropes by assisting with everything from negotiating a lease to building an online presence.
- Supporting succession planning so that when long-time shopkeepers retire, they can retire with dignity and transition of their business to the next generation of entrepreneurs, ensuring their businesses continue to serve the community.

"Think of a BIA as an incubator. Many have the reserves and ability to purchase, renovate, and provide space for new businesses at a preferred rate. Combined with training on leases, finances, digitization, BIAs could attract and prepare the next generation of entrepreneurs for their community," said Kiru. *"The key is not to limit our vision but to explore every opportunity to strengthen main streets."*

This vision reimagines BIAs as not just caretakers and promoters of neighbourhood streets, but as builders of the future local economy.

Why It Matters

The story of BIAs is a story of neighbourhood pride and resilience. From the very first one in Bloor West Village to today's growing network of 85 across Toronto, BIAs have kept our main streets alive and vibrant. They've proven that when businesses come together, entire communities benefit.

Half a century later, Toronto is facing new pressures, ranging from public safety concerns and aging infrastructure to growing transit demands and shifting consumer habits. These changes bring challenges but also open the door for BIAs to evolve once again, turning obstacles into opportunities. With updated tools and modernized legislation, Toronto's BIAs can continue to set the global standard for how communities thrive together.

In the months ahead, TABIA will be working closely with stakeholders to reimagine what **BIA 2.0** could look like. This is your chance to help shape the future of Toronto's main streets. Do you have ideas for how BIAs could better support businesses and communities? Are you interested in being part of upcoming conversations? We'd love to hear from you. Add your name to our **participant list and idea survey** to join us on this journey of renewal and possibility.