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Sunday shopping is a hot topic again in Saint John. Photo: Kate Brydon / Telegraph-Journal archive.

COMMENTARY

SAINT JOHN DEBATES SUNDAY SHOPPING

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In a world of 24-hour online retailing – where Christmas lists can be efficiently dealt with in pyjamas, and Internet giants like Amazon or eBay are ready to satisfy shopping urges with the click of a mouse – having a municipal debate over Sunday shopping hours seems rather quaint.

But it is a debate that Common Council must have, no matter how reluctant individual councillors are to address the topic. The Saint John Board of Trade has presented its stand on the issue, and an online survey of its membership has resulted in a fairly resounding endorsement of flexible Sunday shopping hours.

Here are the numbers that the board of trade recently shared with council: 85.1 per cent of surveyed businesses felt the retail sector should have the option to set their own hours on Sunday, with 84.3 per cent calling for complete flexibility, with retail establishments setting up on early Sunday morning if they so desire.

The online survey hit 543 companies, which was a fairly robust portion of the board's small business membership. Opinions on the subject were offered by 228 businesses, meaning that the survey achieved a 42 per cent response rate.

In an act of due diligence, the board asked a statistics professor at the University of New Brunswick Saint John to validate the survey methodology. The response would warm the heart of any professional pollster.

"The response rate that the Saint John Board of Trade received for their Sunday shopping survey is a very reasonable rate," wrote Dr. Sandy Wilson of UNBSJ. "Their 228 responses would be an accurate reflection of the will of their membership within their calculated error rate of plus or minus 6.5 per cent, at a confidence interval of 95 per cent."

While these survey responses would be considered fairly substantive by anybody with a slight understanding of statistics, they weren't seen in that light by council. According to the council report published by this paper, Coun. Ray Strowbridge was rather uncomfortable interpreting the survey results as a mandate for change.

"Until I get a clear direction from the business owners of this city that this is something they're serious about changing, I'm not ready to move forward," he said.

As somebody who once used a sample survey of 100 local immigrants to argue for substantial policy changes that could help the entire Saint John immigrant community, I have some real problems with the inability to accept survey results that can lead to informed discussion.

While it may be fair to suggest that the board's 42 per cent response rate is by itself not enough of a mandate to change, it's a very dangerous stand if the actual response rate is simply being utilized to prevent policy change from taking place.

Using this logic, it would also be fair to argue that not enough citizens of Saint John voted for change in the last municipal election – the city had a voter turnout of only 45 per cent, according to Elections New Brunswick. Of course, nobody is suggesting that all the new faces elected to council in 2012 didn't in fact represent a mandate for change – despite the fact that only a minority of electors chose them.

The same principle should be applied to the board's survey: while only a minority of business members bothered to fill out the survey, it was a fairly robust minority (hence the fairly decent margin of error in the survey results). For those who did bother to vote, the response was resoundingly affirmative. I'm sure many on council would be thrilled with an endorsement in excess of 80 per cent, even if only 200 citizens responded.

This isn't to say that the city's board of trade is the only voice to listen to in the Sunday shopping debate. Churches and retail employees should also be considered, and they should be encouraged to offer their perspective whenever the Sunday shopping debate is lifted from the council table. There are only so many

retail dollars to go around in any given week, and I'm not convinced that spending those retail dollars early on a Sunday morning will meaningfully strengthen the local economy.

Still, if a small business wants to open whenever they want, it seems grossly unfair for city hall to regulate that business in the retail sector, but ignore other business decisions that may have an impact on local quality of life (the noise complaints about scrap metal being loaded into harbour ships come to mind here).

For this reason, we should continue to have a robust local debate on Sunday shopping, but for that to happen council should accept the board of trade's survey results at face value. I spend a lot of my time looking at numbers, and I know a robust data point when I see one. Whether or not they wanted to hear the results, councillors were given robust data points by the board of trade.

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