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BUSINESS & ECONOMY

New businesses open against pandemic headwinds



Tim Downard, owner of Port City Pro Shop, opened his first permanent location in July, in Market Square, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo: Submitted



🕒 Published 16 hours ago



Kevin Martine | Telegraph-Journal

SAINT JOHN • More Saint John businesses opened than closed in the month of June, the first month this has happened since the pandemic struck in February, according to Statistics Canada data released this week.

A total of 138 new businesses opened in the city in June, while 98 closed, according to the data. That is a significant improvement over the worst month of the pandemic, in April, when 260 businesses closed, and only 65 new ones opened.

“I’m pleasantly surprised that we’ve had openings at all during the pandemic,” said Nancy Tissington, executive director of Uptown Saint John, the core’s business improvement association.

Tissington said she knows of roughly a dozen businesses that have opened in the uptown area in the last few months, compared to about six which have closed. She said that many of the new openings may have already been in the works before COVID struck, based on what she has heard from business owners.

“They were underway in their planning prior to the pandemic,” she said.

Katelyn Price, owner of Juniper, a clothing and lifestyle store, which uptown opened at the start of September, said she had been working on her store for over a year.

“I was in a really lucky position,” Price said. She had been planning on signing a lease to open in May, but was able to defer it a few months when the pandemic began.

“I was able to wait a few months without any monetary repercussions,” she said.

Price said the decision to open now rather than wait any further came down to her belief that people are interested in her business, and the sustainable lifestyles she said it encourages.

“I went with my gut instinct and the feedback that I heard,” she said.

She said her main concern is whether there is a second wave of the virus.

“For me, I think the number one challenge would be if, in a further wave of the pandemic, we had to close down again,” she said.

Other businesses that opened earlier this year say it has been an interesting few months.

“It feels like a blur,” said Tim Downard, owner of Port City Pro Shop, a music shop which opened its first location in July, in Market Square.

Downard said he had been planning to use revenue from concerts and events this summer to help build up cash for the opening, but those events were cancelled, forcing him to rewrite his budget.

“The first challenge was trying to get together what we had, and pick and choose very carefully what to spend on, and what we really didn’t need,” he said.

There were also some difficulties stocking inventory amid the economic disruption.

“There’s been a lot of supply chain issues,” he said. “Different manufacturers that we deal with would have a lot of delayed shipments, or they wouldn’t even have the stuff made.”

The pandemic has also made it harder to get people in the store, Downard said.

“Things are relatively calm here, compared to the rest of the world, but it’s still kind of difficult to get people out and about to come and check out a shop,” he said.

But Downard said the support from the community for his business, which sells instruments and other musical equipment, has been great.

“The uptown community has been super supportive. I don’t think I could have asked for better,” he said, adding that even non-musicians have been coming into the shop to show their support.

As a new business, Downard said he had not qualified for government assistance, but that has not stopped him.

“We can sit around and wait, and hope that we get some help, or we can go out and make something happen even though times are difficult,” he said.

He said the key to the last few months has been keeping a positive attitude.

“The biggest component to getting to where we are from where we were would be staying positive, and believing that it is a possibility, even if it seems overwhelming and improbable.”

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