



■ ENVIRONMENT: Entrepreneur hopes to give eco-businesses exposure in downtown storefront



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Ted Hsu, left, and Phillip Brown are working together to launch a storefront at the former Card Merchant location for Kingston's eco-businesses.

■ SUSTAINABILITY

Winning mixture of passion, practicality

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"There's a lot going on in Kingston in terms of green energy," said Garrah, citing the Wolfe Island windmill project and the Napanee-area solar farm. "Phillip contacted us and said there seems to be a lot happening in the sector. He talked about the concept of a mini-trade show space. That's really how the conversation started."

Garrah and Brown then contacted Ted Hsu, the executive director of SWITCH, a local organization that promotes sustainable energy to replace fossil fuel use. SWITCH is directly connected to the many Kingston-area businesses, researchers and educational institutions involved in eco-friendly technology, the very groups that could benefit from a downtown presence.

"What's exciting for us in terms of our mission is to make a centre for sustainable energy," said Hsu. "What we missed is a storefront. This represents a really visible place with a lot of foot traffic."

"It's like the difference between reading a physical newspaper or the Internet. If you read the paper, you stumble across things. This is like having the newspaper. Things are put in front of you and you'll look at it."

Hsu said Brown brings the right combination of passion and practicality to the venture. "He understands what the challenges are if we keep relying on fossil fuels, yet he's a realist."

Brown insisted he's only tapping into a movement that already exists. "It's not so much my interest," he said. "I thought it was ideal for Kingston. There are 120 members in SWITCH, all involved in green, sustainable efforts. Kingston can be a change agent in Canada and possibly on a global scale."

Brown's green side

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Phillip Brown insists he is not an environmentalist, not even on Earth Day.

"Absolutely not," he said. "I'm a capitalist. But it's important to connect commerce and community."

There's certainly no disputing Brown's capitalist credentials. He's the president and CEO of Brown's Fine Food Services, a Kingston food and beverage company that employs 850 people.

By June, he hopes to merge environmentalism and entrepreneurship at a new non-profit venture at the busy corner of Princess and Montreal streets — an environmental sustainability centre that will offer downtown exposure for Kingston's lesser-known eco-friendly businesses.

"There are so many companies in Kingston working on sustainability on the edge of town in low-rent premises," said Brown.

“The community has a passion for becoming the most sustainable city in Canada. That will require the effort of all the stakeholders.”

Phillip Brown

"It's been on the fringe because it hasn't been getting exposure."

Starting next week, a representative from the centre, Patricia Brown, will start canvassing area eco-businesses to gauge the amount of interest in renting space in the former greeting card store.

The rental rates, or "donations," will range from \$500 a month for a window display on the Princess Street side to \$75 for a 10-foot high, three-foot wide inside wall display. The minimum occupancy time would be six months.

Brown said he's had lots of interest shown in the project. Yesterday, Bullfrog Power, the green energy provider, signed on as the centre's first sponsor.

Brown owns the building, so his goal is to break even while spreading the green word. Any profits, over and above paying for upkeep and staff, will be donated to the Community Foundation's environmental initiatives fund.

"The community has a passion for becoming the most sustainable city in Canada. That will require the effort of all the stakeholders," said Brown. "There is a focal point in every system. Maybe we could be that rallying point."

Brown's vision for the sustainability centre isn't limited to marketing and sales, though businesses promoting everything from solar technology and energy audits to grey water reclama-

tion and pellet stoves would form the core of the clientele.

Governments, the city and region, and non-profit groups could also use the centre to distribute their environmental messages and programs. School children could go there on tours. Green awards could be handed out and new public initiatives launched.

"This is intended to be a centre of stimulation of activity," said Brown. "The way to get to a sustainable future is mainly through education and changing habits. There's no magic bullet. Certainly, using less when less will do, like turning off the water when you're brushing your teeth. Drip, drip, drip. That's a lot of water you don't have to purify."

Kingston Economic Development Corporation CEO Jeff Garrah said the centre could also play an important role in the evolving effort to brand Kingston and the region as a place where green initiatives flourish.