

More than a business: DBOT highlights the power of social enterprise

Have you heard the term social enterprise? Ever wondered what it means?

A social enterprise is a business that uses commercial activities to achieve a social, environmental, or community purpose. Some social enterprises are operated directly by nonprofits or charities, while others are independent businesses that reinvest their profits into a social mission. Simply put, they use business activities to create positive community impact.

I had heard the term before and thought it sounded like an interesting buzzword, but I didn't really understand what it meant until a conversation in 2019 with Michele Fisher, executive director of the Dufferin Community Foundation.

That conversation would ultimately set the Dufferin Board of Trade on a six-year journey of self-reflection, community research, and business development.

Michele explained how social enterprises were helping nonprofits and charities become more sustainable by generating their own revenue while continuing to serve their communities. She also mentioned that funding was available to help organizations explore social enterprise opportunities. As most nonprofit leaders will tell you, hearing the words "grant opportunity" tends to get your attention.

We were fortunate to receive funding through the federal Investment Readiness Program, which allowed us to do the planning, research, and organizational work needed to launch the Dufferin Biz Hub.

The Biz Hub opened as a coworking space in February 2020 – which, as it turned out, was about the worst possible time to open a coworking space. Just weeks later, the pandemic forced us to close our doors.

Like many organizations, we spent the next few years adapting. Between changing regulations, temporary closures, and the distribution of thousands of COVID-19 rapid tests, we learned a great deal about the needs of our business community.

The Biz Hub evolved from a coworking space into a broader business support hub, offering private offices, short- and long-term rentals, meeting spaces, and virtual offices.

When a second round of Investment Readiness Program funding became available, we were fortunate to receive support again. This time, we hired consultants to better understand the needs of local businesses and identify new ways our social enterprise could support them.

What we learned was clear: many businesses needed affordable business services.

Looking within our own organization, we realized we already had many of the skills needed to help. Today, through our in-house team of just two full-time staff, we provide services such as photography, videography, graphic design, administrative and human resources support. When a client's needs extend beyond our expertise or capacity, we're proud to connect them with trusted businesses from our member network.

Today, our offices, meeting spaces, and business services support dozens of entrepreneurs, businesses, and nonprofits every month.

Like many nonprofits, we receive no government operating funding. With fewer grant opportunities than just a few years ago, finding sustainable sources of revenue has become increasingly important. To keep our membership fees, rental rates, and services affordable while continuing to support local businesses, we knew we needed another sustainable revenue source.

That opportunity arrived when a local business owner and member approached us with a concern. After more than 40 years in

business, he was ready to retire and could not find a buyer to keep Broadway Engraving operating.

The opportunity aligned perfectly with our mission.

In late 2025, we purchased Broadway Engraving from Bill Elliott as an expansion of the Dufferin Biz Hub. After extensive training from Bill and a volunteer-driven renovation of our basement workspace, we were ready to begin serving customers.

Today, Broadway Engraving provides custom name tags, signs, plaques, awards, trophies, promotional products, and gifts for businesses, nonprofits, schools, municipalities, and community organizations throughout the County.

For us, social enterprise is about more than generating revenue. Through the Dufferin Biz Hub and Broadway Engraving, we are able to support local businesses, provide affordable services, preserve a long-standing local business, and generate the revenue needed to continue the work of the Dufferin Board of Trade.

It's all built on a simple belief: that small businesses have the power to drive positive change in our community. That's why social enterprise matters?not just to our organization, but to the future of Dufferin County.

This week's monthly Community Voice column is from the Dufferin Board of Trade. It was contributed by Diana Morris, executive director of the Dufferin Board of Trade and Dufferin Biz Hub.