

Founders find support and community in early days of Caledon and DMZ's Incubator Program

By Riley Murphy

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In March, the Town of Caledon announced its partnership with Toronto Metropolitan University's (TMU) DMZ to launch the Humber River Centre Business Incubator powered by DMZ, and now it's swinging into action.

This initiative was announced to be multi-year and will enhance innovation, foster entrepreneurship, and support local economic vitality through targeted programming, mentorship, and resource development.

It provides those with access to incubator programming, training and evaluation, networking and events, and digital services and marketing support.

On June 11, Peer-to-Peer Roundtables began as part of the initiative.

DMZ's Darren Shivraj said the event brings entrepreneurs in Caledon from different backgrounds and stages of their journey together and has them meet with experts and residents from the DMZ who are domain experts in various spaces.

Shivraj said at the last roundtable, many of the entrepreneurs stayed to chat with one another and stay connected after the event.

"A lot of the times when you're building, you're building independently and you don't really have that community to bounce ideas off of and to support each other," shared Shivraj.

One testimonial from the event came from a mother-daughter team here in Caledon.

"We would express much excitement in terms of us stumbling on this period of payroll table lunch, which exposed valuable, insightful information on plans for Caledon business growth. Being in this informative, interactive session led us to feel motivated, inspired, believing there's an opportunity to have the privilege to be mentored by well-seasoned professionals. We would further express that regardless of whether or not one is selected for the program, really knowing the fact that Caledon has invested in this type of business support program is incredibly exciting and hopeful for us as founders."

Shivraj shared that he likes to say the H in Humber River Centre stands for "home."

"To give people that space that they can come in and be vulnerable and ideate together because a lot of the times when you run your own business, it feels like you're always an employee working in the business. We help to act as an extension of their team and allow them that opportunity to look at a high level and work on their business. Then we connect them with all of the resources in the form of DMZ experts, as well as partners we have to be able to help them overcome whatever challenges that they're facing," said Shivraj.

Amanda St. John, Manager of Business Attraction and Investment at the Town of Caledon, said more than a dozen local businesses have engaged with the incubator through coaching or consultation.

"The feedback highlights how the program provides not only practical support such as marketing strategy, funding readiness, and business model refinement but also instills a sense of community and momentum for Caledon-based founders," said St. John.

From the peer-to-peer roundtable, she shared that there was overwhelmingly positive feedback that highlighted the strong demand for business support in Caledon.

The program launched its incubator intake forms last week for the program starting in September.

The 12-week program has the goal of helping entrepreneurs identify what's going well for them, identify the challenges, and then build on that to ensure that they can use DMZ resources to help them grow and scale.

?Over the course of the next few months, we're going to continue meeting with as many local entrepreneurs as we can and doing a pulse on their businesses and getting a good idea of where the areas of support that they need the most, and then helping them come up with both a high level strategy, as well as a tactical plan that will allow them to grow their businesses and then to really achieve whatever reality they're looking for in terms of their dream business, the dream lifestyle,? said Shivraj.

Entrepreneurs can book 15-minute sessions before moving onto the 45-minute virtual chat; Shivraj said it all begins with the 15-minute virtual consultation.

From there, residents can obtain real strategic support from the program.

St. John shared that through the Humber River Centre Business Incubator, they aim to incubate approximately 45 startups over the course of the initiative, hosting a series of workshops, seminars, and peer-to-peer events to build a more connected and resilient business community.

?This initiative isn't just about supporting early-stage companies. It's part of our long-term economic development strategy to foster innovation, attract investment, and ensure Caledon-based businesses have access to the same level of support available in larger urban centres. By partnering with DMZ, one of the world's top-ranked university-based incubators, we're bringing world-class resources, mentorship, and programming directly into our community. Ultimately, our goal is to help Caledon businesses start, grow, and expand whether they're tech-enabled startups, local service providers, or companies in the food, agriculture, or advanced manufacturing sectors,? said St. John.