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■ **DEVELOPMENT:** Keefer Developments' owner Phil Ritchie wants more residents

New focus for downtown Falls

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NIAGARA FALLS — Phil Ritchie has a new vision for downtown.

Never mind bringing in tourists. Forget landing a big-box store or a major retailer. Don't gamble on a theatre district.

The head of Keefer Developments Limited, which just bought 40 commercial properties and 60 residential units from Historic Niagara Developments Inc., said his primary focus is on bringing new residents to the Queen St. area. If he's successful at that, the other developments will follow, he said.

Ritchie, a 49-year-old developer from Thorold, joined the management team at Historic Niagara in 2010, but said he didn't necessarily agree with the strategy of CEO Mordechai Grun. "He's very bright and very passionate, but our visions are different," said Ritchie, who was something of a hired gun for Grun. Historic Niagara was hoping Ritchie could be a new face for the company, which had first started buying up property on Queen St. in 2003.

"The whole idea of creating tourism downtown was not jelling," Ritchie said. "My view is the opposite of where Mordechai was heading. I want to build a downtown for locals. I think Niagara Falls is yearning for it."

Ritchie launched Keefer Developments in 2001 after the City of Thorold put out a request for proposals to develop a number of vacant and aging buildings. Keefer won the project and redeveloped the Keefer Mansion Inn, Welland Mills and the former Gallaher paper mill.

It was a redevelopment that had a mix of residential and commercial uses and helped relaunch what had been a struggling Thorold downtown.

"All three of those buildings were in quite bad disarray when he took over," said Tim Whalen, a city councillor in Thorold. "The revitalization was fantastic. It wouldn't have happened without Phil."

Whalen said Niagara Falls should consider Ritchie an asset.

"Now Phil has his developments in another municipality. It would be nice to have Keefer back here," he said. "Niagara Falls' win is Thorold's loss."

Two years ago, Ritchie partnered with Grun on a 20,000-square-foot building on Queen St. he wanted to redevelop as apartments for the over-55 crowd. That 30-unit project, which is expected to be completed this summer, was part of the sale finalized this week. Units will be one or two bedrooms and will start at \$500 a month.

The sale from Historic Niagara also included another 30 rental units in the commercial buildings.

"We need a built-in audience of supporters and I hope in the



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Phil Ritchie's company, Keefer Developments, recently purchased 40 properties in downtown Niagara Falls that were owned by Historic Niagara Development.

next four or five months, we can turn on 60 new units," he said. "If you could get 90 or so people living down here, it could make a noticeable difference on this street."

He also plans to sell off many of the properties he purchased as the right buyers come along.

"I don't believe downtowns should be owned by one entity. I think it ends up looking too much like that one person's view," he said. "Downtowns by their nature are interesting because they're organic and quirky. You have interesting small businesses and it's friendly and warm."

Rather than selling buildings to investors, Ritchie wants business owners downtown and said his company will help with financing if that's what it'll take.

"I want to put the buildings in the hands of people who intend to operate those businesses," he said.

Ritchie used Cupolo Sports as an example. Owner Jerry Cupolo purchased a vacant building at the corner of Queen St. and Chrysler Ave. and is relocating his store there from Ferry St. next month.

"He's excited about being part of a vibrant downtown. If we can find a few more operators like that, as a vendor, we're going to help facilitate deals," Ritchie said.

On Queen St. this week, there seemed to be a renewed sense of optimism about the future.

"You can't say 100% everything will be peachy, but new blood and new ownership always bring a new way of looking at things," said Nemanja Kuntos, the general manager of the Downtown Business Improvement Area. "I think we're going in a new direction."

Kuntos said the residential focus is crucial.

"Without people living downtown, you don't have people shopping downtown. The more people you have living here, the more chance there is for it to grow," he said.

While there's plenty of optimism, not everyone is ready to gamble on a long-term lease just yet.

Pulp Comics owner Paul Tappay said he's happy with the change, but will wait to see what happens in the coming few months before committing to sticking around.

"The last thing I want to do is move from Queen St. I want to be down here, but what has Queen St. done for me?" he said. "I've been here since 2009 and, by my count, 37 businesses have left or come and gone since I've been here. We're hemorrhaging."

Tappay's lease ends in April, but he said he'll reassess his plans in the next few months.

"When I hear (Ritchie's) plan is to have people living here, I'm willing to stay here until the end of the summer. If I like what I see, I'll stick around," he said.