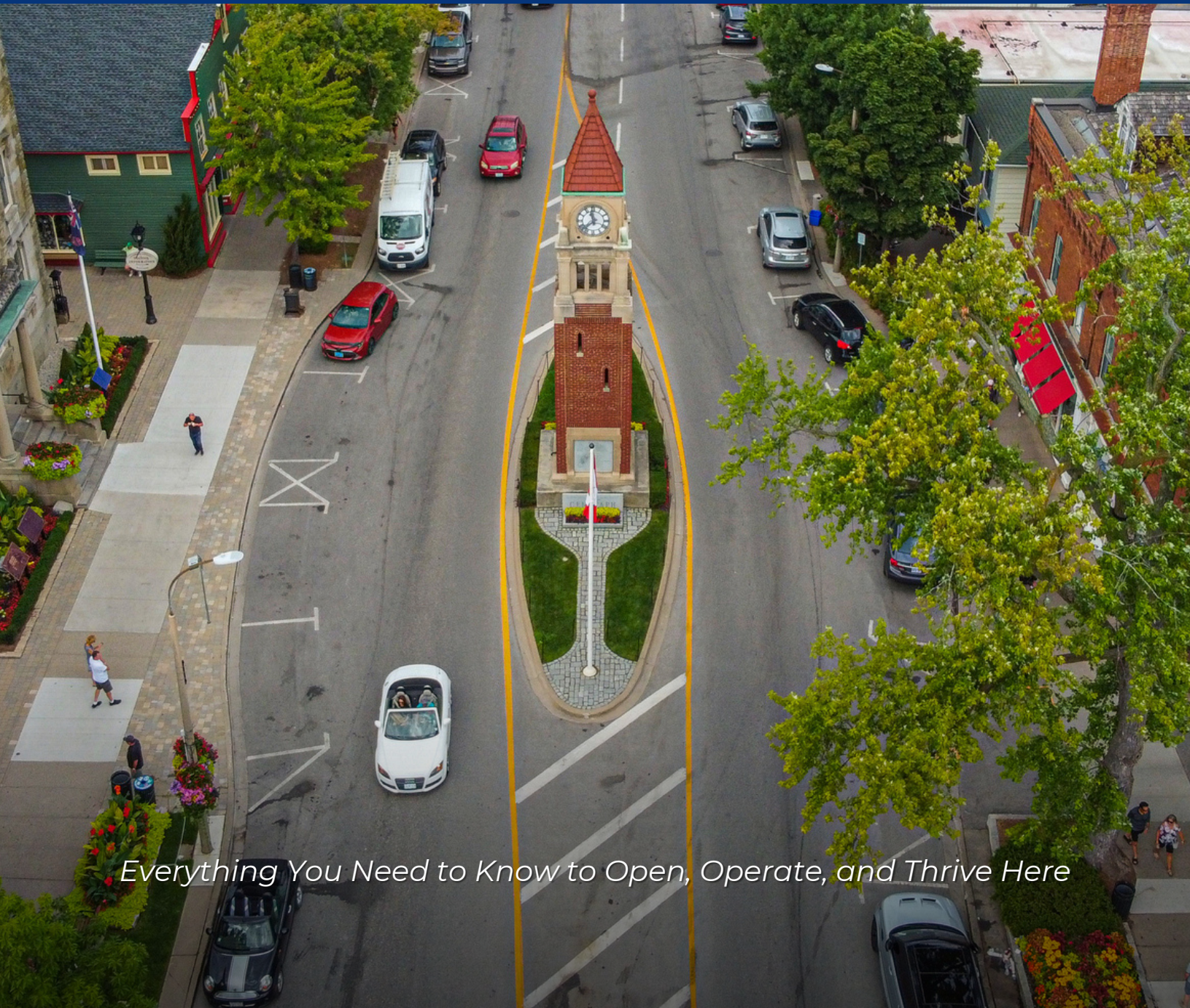




Niagara-on-the-Lake's Heritage District

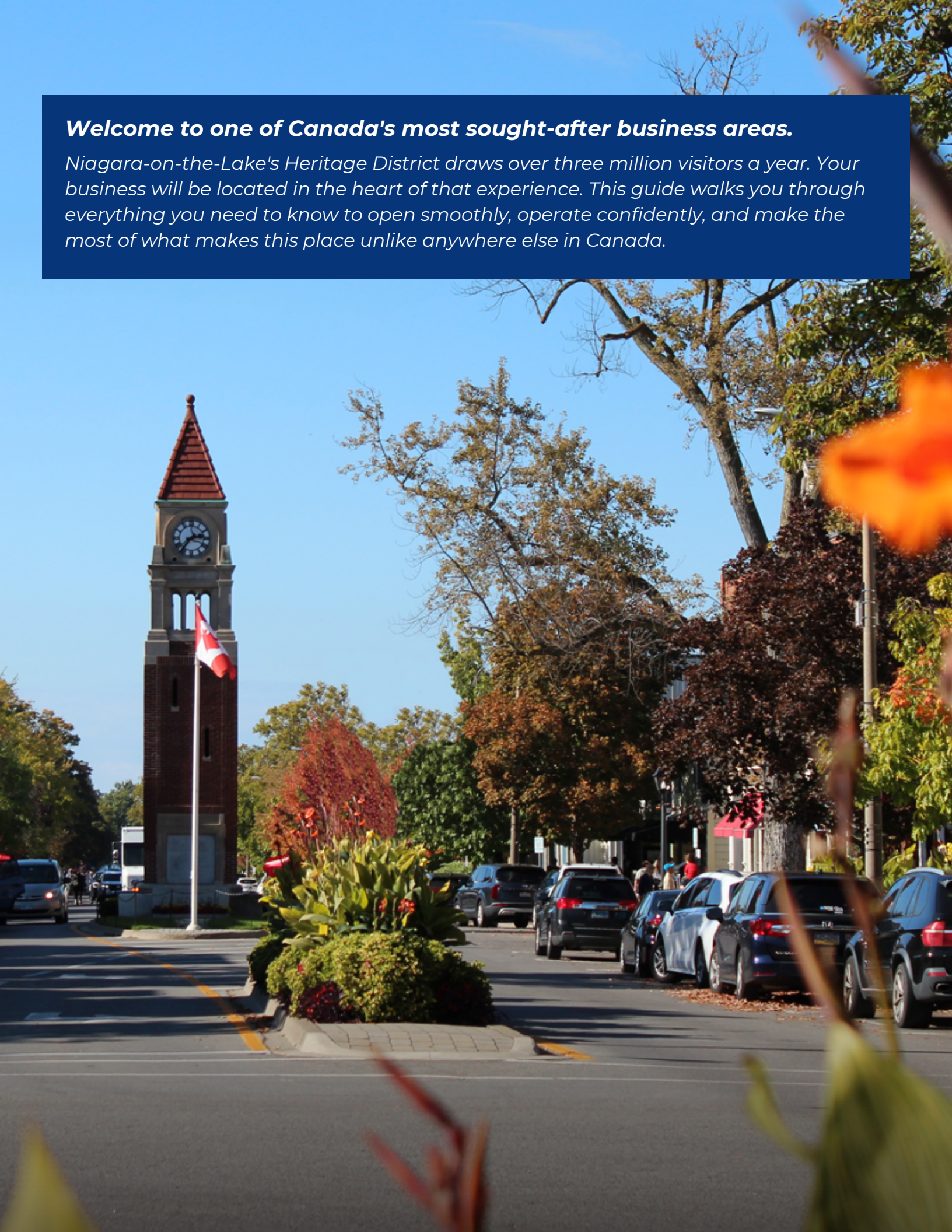
Business Guide



Everything You Need to Know to Open, Operate, and Thrive Here

Welcome to one of Canada's most sought-after business areas.

Niagara-on-the-Lake's Heritage District draws over three million visitors a year. Your business will be located in the heart of that experience. This guide walks you through everything you need to know to open smoothly, operate confidently, and make the most of what makes this place unlike anywhere else in Canada.

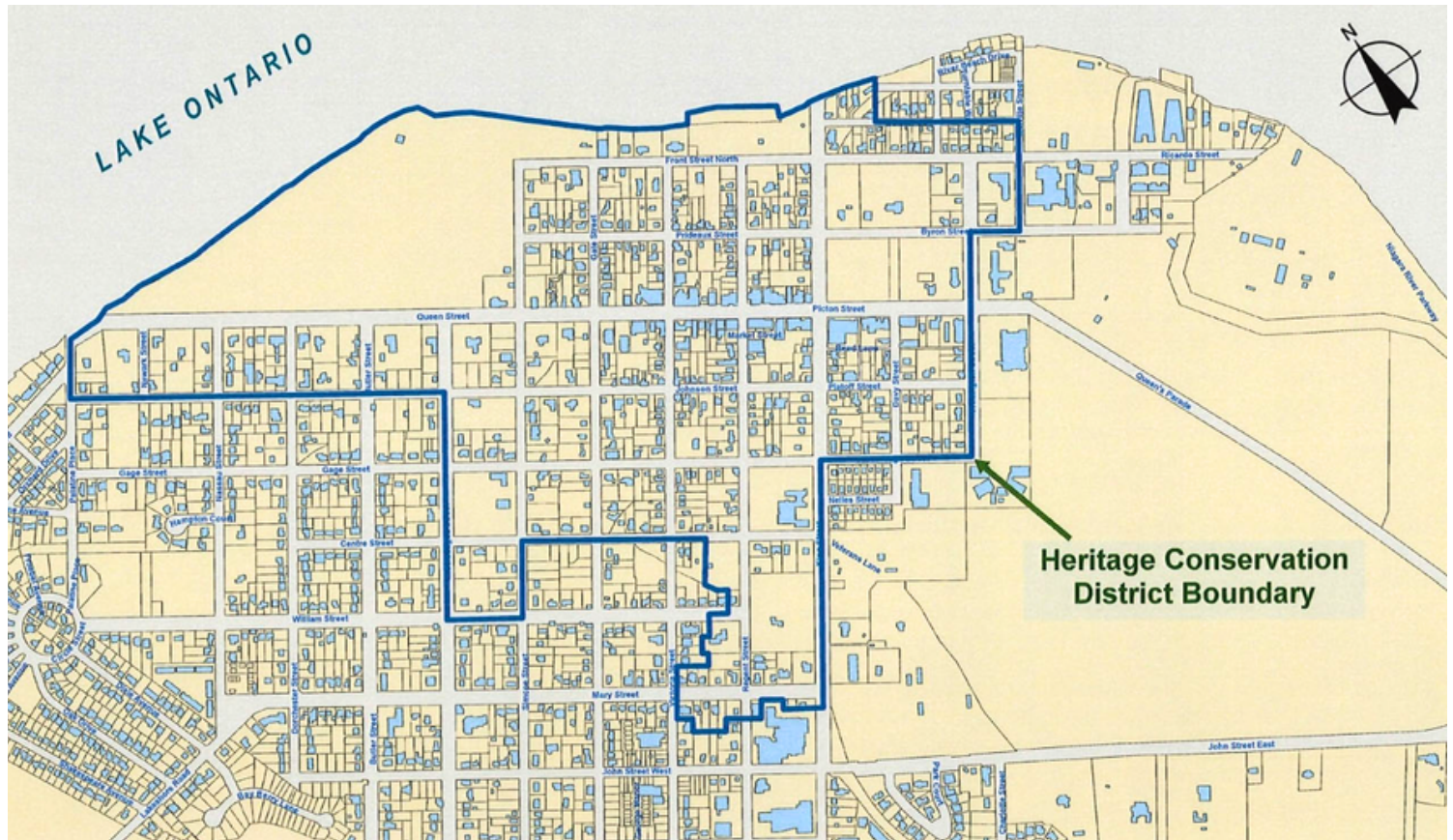


Why the Heritage District Is Good for Business

What is the Heritage District?

Niagara-on-the-Lake's Old Town is one of the best-preserved 19th-century townscapes in North America, and that is not by accident. The Queen-Picton Heritage Conservation District (HCD) is a framework of design guidelines and standards that protects the character of Old Town, ensuring the streets, buildings, and storefronts that draw millions of visitors every year stay exactly that way. For businesses, that means your investment is protected too.

In February 2026, Council unanimously approved an expansion of the District boundary, recognizing even more of Old Town's historic fabric. If you're not sure whether your property falls within the District, our Planning team is happy to help confirm.



How the District Works

The District operates under By-law 4362-10 (the Queen-Picton HCD Plan), with an updated and expanded Plan (By-law 2026-030) currently under provincial review. In practice, this means a streamlined permit process for exterior changes and signage, with Staff ready to guide you through it. We can confirm exactly what applies to your property at any time.

Your Location Is Your Competitive Advantage

Operating on Queen Street or in the surrounding Heritage District means your business benefits from one of the most powerful built-in marketing assets in Ontario, the streetscape itself. Visitors come specifically because Niagara-on-the-Lake looks the way it does. The permit process is how we protect that for everyone. Here's what to be aware of as you plan your space:

- A Heritage Permit is required for exterior changes - signs, awnings, paint colours, windows, and facade work
- There will be a review by the Town's Municipal Heritage Committee, with Town Staff working collaboratively with you to develop recommendations for the Committee's consideration.

The Town's goal is to make this process as smooth as possible. Most permit applications are straightforward when you start early and talk to Staff first.

The Four Character Areas

The expanded District identifies four character areas. Your property's character area may affect what alterations are permitted:

Character Area	Description
Commercial Core	The main Queen Street corridor; most businesses are here. Highest level of heritage responsibility for all exterior changes and signage.
Residential Areas	Side streets and surrounding neighbourhoods. Commercial uses are permitted. Please be mindful of nearby residents. Heritage design standards apply.
Queen Street Summer Homes	Historic properties along Queen Street, recognized in the Town's adopted Official Plan for their residential-scale heritage character.
Institutional Core	Churches, public buildings, and civic institutions - often individually designated under Part IV as well.

Your Opening Checklist - Let's Get You There

Opening a business in the Heritage District is very achievable - businesses do it every season. The key is starting the permit process early and knowing who to call. Here's a list of what you'll need to complete, with contacts for each.

Permit	When Required	Who to Contact
Zoning Check	Recommended before signing a lease or purchasing a property to confirm your proposed business is permitted under the property's current zoning, or to identify any approvals that may be required.	Planning, Building & Development planning.development@notl.com www.notl.com/planning
Building Permit	Required for any construction, renovation, interior fit-up, change of use, or structural modification. Apply via Cloudpermit online.	Building Services building@notl.com www.notl.com/building-services
Heritage Permit	Required before any alteration to the exterior of a designated property, including signs, awnings, paint colour, windows, doors, and facade work.	Heritage Planning heritage@notl.com www.notl.com/heritage-planning
Sign Permit	Required for all signs within the Queen-Picton Zone (By-law 4586-12, s.5.03). Both a Sign Permit AND a Heritage Permit are needed for permanent signs.	By-law Enforcement www.notl.com/enforcement
Liquor Licence (AGCO)	Required if your business serves alcohol. Provincial approval is separate from municipal permits.	Alcohol & Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) www.agco.ca/en/alcohol/licence-s-and-permits
Health Inspection	Required for food-service businesses. Contact Niagara Region Public Health.	Niagara Region Public Health www.niagararegion.ca/health
Niagara Parks Permit	Required if your property or signage is within 400 metres of Niagara Parks lands.	Niagara Parks Commission www.niagaraparks.com

Your Fastest Path to Opening: Reach Out Early

Before finalizing your plans or submitting permit applications, contact the appropriate Town Staff to discuss your project. Heritage Planning Staff can provide guidance on proposed exterior alterations and Heritage Permit requirements, while By-law Staff can answer questions about Sign Permit requirements. Early conversations help identify potential issues, clarify the approvals you'll need, and ensure your applications are complete. If you're applying for a Heritage Restoration Grant, a pre-consultation with Heritage Planning Staff is required.



Signs - Making Your Business Visible in a Heritage Setting

Your sign is one of your most important marketing tools, and in a heritage setting, a well-designed sign can make your business look exceptional. The Heritage District has clear guidelines that channel great design rather than restrict it. Here's how it works.

What Requires Both a Heritage Permit and a Sign Permit

- Permanent fascia signs (mounted on the building face)
- Projecting/blade signs (extending from the building)
- Window lettering or graphics (permanent)
- Awnings with business name or logo
- Any sign involving illumination

What Requires a Sign Permit Only

- Temporary signs (e.g. seasonal promotions, event banners)

What Is Prohibited in the Queen-Picton Zone

The following sign types are not permitted in the Heritage District:

- A-Frame / Sandwich Board signs
- Mobile signs (can be moved without a motor vehicle)
- Neon signs
- Roof signs
- Signs with flashing, animated, or scrolling elements
- Signs that obscure heritage building features (windows, cornices, decorative details)

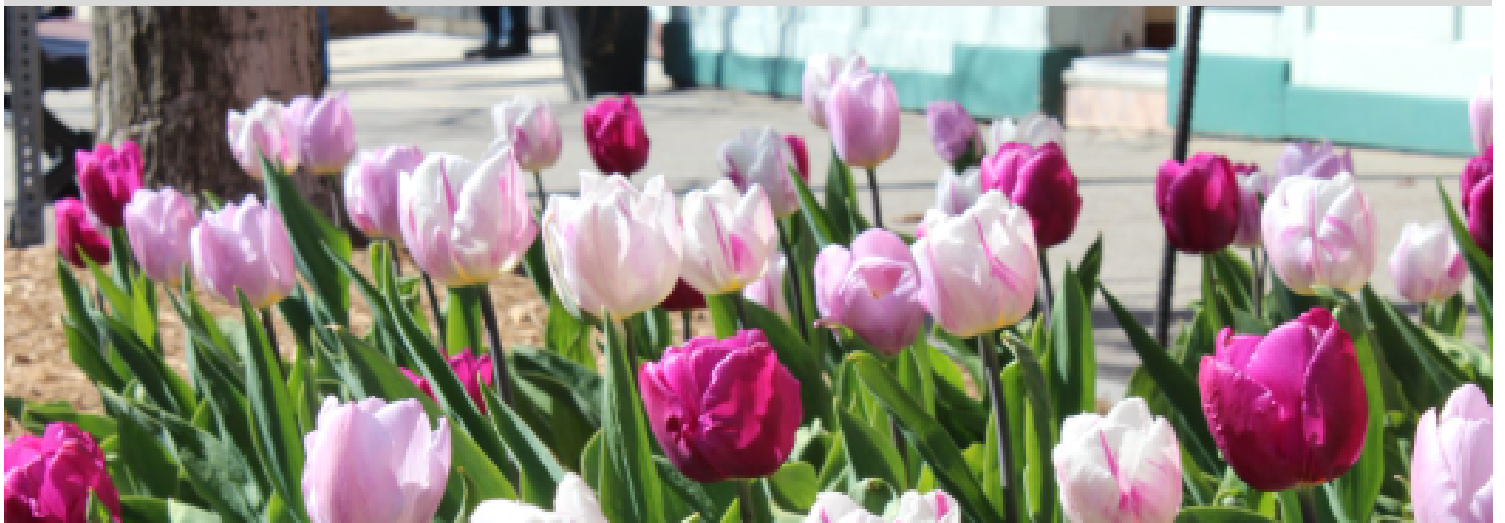
Sign Design Guidelines

Signs in the Heritage District must be compatible with the character of the building and the District. When designing your sign, keep these principles in mind:

- Use traditional materials - painted wood, metal, or carved/applied letters are encouraged
- Scale the sign to the building - signs should not dominate the facade
- Avoid backlit box signs; consider individually lit letters or gooseneck lighting
- Colours should complement the building and the streetscape
- The Municipal Heritage Committee reviews Heritage Permit applications for signs

Discussing with Town Staff Can Save You Weeks

Talk to Heritage Planning Staff before finalizing your sign design. A quick pre-consultation ensures your sign will be approved the first time, and Staff can share examples of what works beautifully in the District. This is a free service and one of the best ones we offer.



Building Exterior & Modifications

Planning to refresh your space? Great! The permit process is designed to support those improvements. A Heritage Permit is required for many exterior changes, and depending on the scope of the proposed work, a Building Permit may also be required. Planning helps make the process straightforward. Here's what typically requires a Heritage Permit, so there are no surprises.

Work That Always Requires a Heritage Permit

- Painting or repainting the exterior (colour changes)
- Replacing windows or doors
- Adding, modifying, or removing awnings
- Changes to roofing materials, cladding, or siding
- Adding or removing architectural features (cornices, trim, shutters, etc.)
- Installing mechanical equipment visible from the street (HVAC, meters, conduit)
- Demolition or removal of any heritage feature

Work That May Not Require a Heritage Permit

By-law 4362-10 lists certain minor works that are exempt from Heritage Permit requirements. Examples may include like-for-like repairs using the same materials, interior work not affecting designated features, and routine maintenance. Confirm with Heritage Planning Staff that your project is exempt.

Protect Your Investment - Get the Permit First

Starting exterior work without the required Heritage and/or Building Permit can result in a stop-work order and costly reversals. The good news: permits are straightforward when submitted before work begins. A quick call to Heritage Planning and/or Building Services is all it takes to confirm what you need.

Property That May Be Designated Under Both Part IV and Part V

Some properties in the Heritage District are also individually designated under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act (as historically significant on their own, not just as part of the District). These properties have additional protections. Check with Heritage Planning to confirm your property's designation status. Learn more about property designations by visiting the Town website at www.notl.com/heritage-planning.

Heritage Grants - Money to Help You Restore and Renovate

Here's one that many new business owners miss: if your building is a designated heritage property, the Town will cover 50% of your eligible restoration or conservation costs - up to \$7,500. That's real money toward windows, masonry, roofing, doors, and architectural features.

Program Details		Information
Grant Amount	50% of eligible project costs, up to \$7,500 maximum	
Who Is Eligible	Owners of properties designated under Part IV or Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act - residential, commercial, or institutional	
What It Covers	Conservation or restoration work on heritage attributes of the property (e.g. windows, doors, masonry, roofing, architectural features)	
How to Apply	Pre-consultation with Heritage Planning Staff is required before application.	
Contact	Heritage Planning - heritage@notl.com 905-468-3266	

Funds Are Limited and First-Come, First-Served

If restoration work is part of your fit-up plan, submit your grant application as early as possible. Pre-consultation with Heritage Planning Staff is required before applying, and funds are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. Don't leave money on the table! Call Heritage Planning before you start any conservation work.



Quick Reference: What You Can Do and How

Activity	Permit	Information
Permanent wall sign on building	Yes, with approval	Heritage Permit & Sign Permit
A-frame / sandwich board sign	No	Not permitted in Queen-Picton Zone
Mobile sign	No	Not permitted in Queen-Picton Zone
Neon sign	No	Not permitted in Queen-Picton Zone
Flashing or animated sign	No	Not permitted in Queen-Picton Zone
Temporary promotional sign/banner	Yes	Sign Permit
Exterior paint colour change	Yes, with approval	Heritage Permit
Window or door replacement	Yes, with approval	Heritage Permit
Interior renovation (no heritage features)	Generally, yes	Building Permit (confirm with Staff)
Change of use (e.g. retail to restaurant)	Depends on zoning	Building Permit & Zoning confirmation



Recommended First Steps

- ✓ Book a pre-consultation with Heritage Planning Staff before committing to any sign design, exterior modifications, or renovation plans.
- ✓ Confirm zoning, permitted uses, and Building Code requirements with Town Staff, including whether a change of use or Building Permit is required, before signing your lease or finalizing your plans.
- ✓ Design your sign and exterior improvements in consultation with Heritage Planning Staff, then submit the required Heritage Permit and Sign Permit applications.
- ✓ Apply for your Building Permit (if required) through Cloudpermit once your plans and approvals are in place.
- ✓ If your property is designated, consider applying for a Heritage Restoration Grant to help offset the cost of eligible conservation work.



Helpful Contacts

Contact the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake

Planning Services

✉ planning.development@notl.com  www.notl.com/planning
☎ 905-468-3266

Building Services

✉ building.division@notl.com  www.notl.com/building-services
☎ 905-468-3266

Heritage Planning

✉ heritage@notl.com  www.notl.com/heritage-planning
☎ 905-468-3266

By-law Enforcement

✉ bylaw@notl.com  www.notl.com/enforcement
☎ 905-468-3266



Niagara-on-the-Lake is Open for Business

The Heritage District is one of our greatest economic assets. The rules exist to protect the very thing that fills your restaurant, drives traffic to your shop, and makes your address something special. We want your business here, and we're committed to making the process work for you.

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