



### Activating Community Space in the Oakwood and Vaughan Area

**Date:** November 23, 2020

**To:** Economic and Community Development Committee

**From:** Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration

**Wards:** Toronto-St. Paul's - Ward 12

#### SUMMARY

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This report responds to Council direction to assess service needs in the Oakwood and Vaughan area and identify opportunities for creating a vibrant and sustainable community hub by recommending the initiation of the development of a community program in an existing community space in a Toronto District School Board property, formerly known as the Vaughan Road Academy, as a pilot beginning in 2021.

Included in this report is an overview of stakeholder and community engagement as well as an assessment of a potential site for new community services, with a summary of findings and immediate next steps.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration recommends that:

1. City Council direct the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration, in consultation with relevant City divisions, boards, and community agencies, to develop a pilot for a new dedicated community space for youth, including the programming, staffing, and other resources needed for operations, in the Oakwood and Vaughan area to launch in 2021, contingent on securing the location at 529 Vaughan Road.
2. City Council direct the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, in consultation with relevant City divisions, to explore opportunities which may be presented through new development to secure a permanent future location in the Oakwood and Vaughan area for such a community space, should the pilot in Recommendation 1 be successful.

#### FINANCIAL IMPACT

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Subject to Council approval, the first year of the pilot will be awarded in 2020 and will be

accommodated within existing resources

Requirements are expected to include the cost of operationalization of a programming model that meets local community needs in partnership with local service delivery partners, as well as leasing and permitting costs from the Toronto District School Board and Toronto Lands Corporation charged to the City on a cost-recovery basis.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications as identified in the Financial Impact section.

## **DECISION HISTORY**

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On March 27, 2019, City Council passed a motion for the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration to work with City Divisions and Agencies, the Toronto District School Board, the Oakwood Vaughan Neighbourhood Action Partnership and the Ward Councillor to identify opportunities for creating a vibrant and sustainable community hub at the Vaughan Road Academy to meet the needs of the local community.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2019.MM5.20>

On July 23, 2018, City Council passed a motion to request that the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration report on the status of the Oakwood Vaughan Strategy and Action Plan in the first quarter of 2019.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2018.MM44.54>

On April 20, 2015, Community Development and Recreation Committee requested an update on the Oakwood Vaughan Strategy.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2015.CD3.11>

On August 25, 2014, City Council requested that the Executive Director, Social Development, Finance and Administration report with recommendations for an Oakwood Vaughan Strategy to improve economic development, social services and land-use planning for the neighbourhood to address issues of high unemployment, petty crime and lack of economic development in coordination with the Toronto Public Library, Toronto Public Health and the Toronto Police.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2014.CD31.7>

## **EQUITY IMPACT**

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Service providers identified that youth are being referred to services located outside of the neighbourhood, and because of incurred transportation costs, this can be a barrier for lower income populations. This area is home to higher-than average numbers of racialized populations. Some youth express that they experience barriers to local programming, such as costs, travel times or social boundaries.

This pilot is an opportunity to provide a new space in the community that can be programmed to address the needs of youth who may not be accessing services closer to where they live. These include older and younger youth, youth in low-income, racialized and those who are socially-marginalized, including Indigenous, Black, Queer and Trans identified youth and young women. By providing multiple spaces that provide

similar programming, barriers to access, including physical accessibility can be addressed through intentional equitable programs.

## **COMMENTS**

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Between March 2019 and February 2020, staff at Social Development, Finance and Administration conducted a fulsome assessment of the needs and assets in the Oakwood and Vaughan community. This work was undertaken in consultation with the local Ward Councillor and their staff, the Oakwood Vaughan Neighbourhood Action Partnership, local service providers, including relevant City Divisions and Agencies, and community members. Diverse groups of local community youth also participated in the consultations.

For the purpose of the assessment, the study area was bounded by the Beltline Trail between Dufferin and Allen Road to the north, Winnett Avenue extended down to Arlington Avenue to the east, Dufferin to the west and St. Clair Avenue West to the south. The assessment area also included some facilities and services that are located at a relatively short distance by bike, car or by transit.

The assessment included several parts:

- review and summary of the previous work done in the neighbourhood to assess and advocate for community services, including all relevant reports and letters to Council
- meetings with the local service providers, stakeholders, including a local community group
- updating and analysing area demographics using 2016 census data
- service analysis using the City 211 data and then a phone survey of listed service providers
- surveying community members, including youth
- consultation with the community through local events hosted by the Councillor's office, including a public service fair
- an assessment of the site at the 529 Oakwood Avenue, the former Vaughan Road Academy, as a location to provide community programming.

Local City of Toronto services such as Toronto Public Library branches and City Community Centres, and other Toronto District School Board and Toronto Catholic District School Board facilities used for City programs were also included in the assessment.

### **Current Local Service Context in the Oakwood and Vaughan Area**

In 2019, the City of Toronto's 211 database had 21 agencies listed as providing community services within this assessment area. The Toronto Public Library has two locations in the area, the Maria Shchuka Library, and the Oakwood Village Library.

The City's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division also has a number of facilities that serve the broader community. This includes 4 community centres, an arena and shared use school locations including the former Vaughan Road Academy and a number of other smaller locations that offer registered courses, drop-in courses and permits serve the community.

## Documentation Review

A number of reports have been created about the service and safety needs in the Oakwood Vaughan area, and are included as a list in Appendix A. The Oakwood Vaughan Neighbourhood Action Partnership provided staff with 33 public documents, reports and submissions to Council regarding community needs spanning 1985-2018. Staff created an annotated bibliography of all of the documents and presented it to the Oakwood Vaughan Neighbourhood Action Partnership, and they have published it on their community website. Over the years, reports have documented the needs of seniors, youth and people with low educational or workforce involvement in the Oakwood and Vaughan neighbourhood. Consistent concerns regarding safety have also been noted. The findings of this review was used to frame specific demographic analyses and some of the survey questions for service providers.

## Census Update

In 2016, Statistics Canada did an update on the census which was more reliable in surveying more vulnerable populations than the previous household survey in 2011. Due to the higher reliability, it was possible to take a more nuanced look at some of the key demographic indicators that were positioned as being areas of interest by the local stakeholders. Staff mapped these indicators at a finer level of detail than usual called a "Dissemination Area" by Statistics Canada. These Dissemination Areas have greater geographic detail for demographic populations to compare to the general population averages of the City of Toronto. Maps were made available for the local community and service providers to build an understanding of demographic rationale for trends noticed in the community.

The following points summarize key demographic data and trends of the Oakwood and Vaughan area and are available in more detail in tables in Appendix B:

- 12.3 percent of the population in the neighbourhood self-identify on the census as "Black", compared to the City-wide average of 8.9 percent.
- The "Black"<sup>1</sup> population is distinctly clustered in Dissemination Areas that also have high levels of renters, and are represented in the areas that abut Vaughan Road, with the highest levels being in the area of Vaughan Road Academy and near the Dufferin and Eglinton intersection.
- A noted and confirmed observation of the stakeholders was that although there are high levels of employment, educational attainment is lower in the Oakwood Vaughan area, with only 18.3 percent of the population having a bachelor degree versus 23.9 percent for the City average and 24.85 percent of the population having "No Diploma" versus the City average of 16.44 percent.
- While the prevalence of "Low Income After Tax - 2015" households living in the community is lower than the City average at 17.3 percent, there are Dissemination Areas where the prevalence of "Low Income" is significantly higher at between 22 and 50 percent. Many of these Dissemination Areas are the same areas as those that indicate higher than average "Black" populations and renter populations.

In summary, census data demonstrates that the area has clusters of people living with lower incomes and lower education attainment rates. This is coupled with a higher

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<sup>1</sup> All words in quotations are defined terms of Statistics Canada's 2016 Household Survey. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/ref/dict/index-eng.cfm>

percentage of Black and racialized population than the City average, which confirmed the observations of many in the community.

### **Stakeholder meetings**

Staff met with the Oakwood Vaughan Neighbourhood Action Partnership, a community group that formed as a response to local community needs. This group has City staff participation from Parks, Forestry and Recreation, Economic Development and Culture, Public Health, Social Development, Finance and Administration and the Toronto Public Library. Starting in March 2019, Social Development, Finance and Administration staff attended most of the monthly meetings of this group throughout the assessment process, as requested by the Council direction, to inform them of progress and to gather feedback on work.

### **Service Provider Survey and Interviews**

There are 21 local service providers for the Oakwood Vaughan catchment. The City conducted 18 surveys, for 16 agencies and 18 programs in the community, not including day cares. This included seniors' services, arts groups, employment services, the libraries, health care services, shelter and housing services, the food bank and others.

Almost all service providers identified affordable housing access and quality of housing as being one of the greatest challenges to the local residents.

Many providers also identified local health services and clinics being needed to serve the local population. Note that this survey was completed in June 2019 which was prior to the new Unison Health Services location opening on Oakwood Avenue which may have offset some of this service need.

The third category of service need identified in the follow-up interviews were youth services and community spaces. Places to safely gather and socialize, places to access healthy food, recreational programs, educational counselling, mental health supports, and employment services are needed within the area for both younger and older youth. Service providers observed that youth are being referred to services located outside of the neighbourhood, and because of transportation cost, this can be a barrier for lower income populations.

Lack of spaces to book for programming were also noted by several agencies. Although the Maria Shchuka Library has rooms that can be booked, it has very little availability due to high demand for the spaces in the building, including the regular use of the library for the Youth Hub and other youth programs. Oakwood Village Library and Arts Centre also welcomes many youth, but space is also limited in this location due to demand. It is noted by service providers that youth from as far away as Lawrence Heights are currently accessing youth programming in the Oakwood Vaughan area. This was confirmed by youth surveys. In the recent expansion of Library Youth Hubs, this area was examined for further youth program enhancement, but with an existing hub in the area, will not receive a second hub in the near future.

The Youth Outreach Workers for the Oakwood Vaughan community who support local programs observed that there is significant demand for youth drop-in programs and that there are likely youth that are not being served in the current program provision due to

geographic barriers to access.

A meeting with service providers in the community was convened in the summer of 2019 to discuss the assessment work and the possibility of using former Vaughan Road Academy as a multi-service community facility. In attendance were staff from the Toronto District School Board, the Local Health Integration Network, Nia Centre for the Arts, the Toronto Public Library, Unison Health Services, the John Howard Society, Montage, and the Toronto Western Hospital Family Health Team. It was noted that the school itself is still and will continue to be considered a "core holding" as a part of the programming needs of the school board.

While the majority of the school is housing a school population for a school that is under development, Parks, Forestry and Recreation is actively permitting the pool for swimming lessons and the gymnasium for youth basketball programs on two weekday evenings, and there are two daycares currently operating in the school. This activity has continued under a modified format during the pandemic emergency. There are also two classrooms on the third floor, accessible by an outdoor-entrance stairwell, that are available to be leased or permitted at a cost to the operator on a longer term basis, even during school day operating hours. The remainder of the school will be required to deliver educational programming in the near and medium terms.

A second service provider meeting was convened by the City Councillor to discuss community safety. This was attended by representatives of all three levels of government, several service providers and City staff from Social Development, Finance and Administration. Community safety, and the needs of youth in the community were discussed, including the need for educational and job training supports.

### **Community Consultations**

In addition to the documentation review and surveys of service agencies in the community, community members were also consulted and surveyed.

The Councillor's office held well-attended community meetings for the general public throughout the summer and fall for the Oakwood and Vaughan community, and administered an online survey to residents that was open for three weeks. This general survey regarding a variety of service evaluations, such as safety, services for seniors and library services, and had over 100 unique responses. The survey results indicated that 62 percent of respondents did not feel that there were suitable places for youth in the community, with only 10 respondents stating that they had accessed a youth service in the community. A strong finding of the survey was also that the majority of respondents were concerned about gun violence.

A community service fair was also held at the Maria Shchuka Library in January 2020 to raise awareness of local residents to the presence of service providers in the community and to provide another forum to assess what services were still missing from the community. City staff attended the community service fair to engage residents and youth to complete surveys.

Social Development, Finance and Administration also created a survey to be given to youth in the community by Youth Outreach Workers in January 2020. Thirty (30) written

responses were received from this group. They outlined that important locations for youth to socialize currently include Dufferin Mall, Fairbank Community Centre and the Youth Hub at Maria Shchuka Library, and expressed needs for more youth receptive spaces generally, for job supports and support and that safe places for girls, and LGBTQ2S populations would be desired as well as more youth sports. In February 2020, staff from Social Development, Finance and Administration engaged with an additional 74 youth near the locations mentioned above. Of these youth, it was noted that only 6 young women participated.

The survey findings were that youth have limited access to:

- Safe places to socialize
- Programming spaces
- Low-cost organized sports
- Education and employment supports

The youth surveyed indicated that they enjoy the libraries, but note that the Oakwood library has limited programming available and, if they are too loud, they are not as welcome. Youth that attend the basketball drop-in program at the former Vaughan Road Academy cite that other basketball programs in the area have a cost, which they consider a barrier. The young women expressed that there are very few "girl"-only programs for youth and would like to see more young women's programming.

The youth expressed that they would be interested in a space that will provide safety, hang out space, computers, Wi-Fi, employment readiness and educational support. They also expressed that they would be interested and want to be engaged in providing input to what programming and services they need.

### **Site Visit**

A site visit of former Vaughan Road Academy was arranged to assess the viability of the location as a site to provide additional services. Attendees included the local Councillor and staff, leasing and property representatives from the Toronto Lands Corporation, the Provincial Youth Outreach Worker, and City staff from Parks, Forestry and Recreation, and the Safety and Wellbeing Unit, and Tower and Neighbourhood Revitalization Unit from Social Development, Finance and Administration. Representatives of the Oakwood Vaughan Neighbourhood Action Partnership and the NIA Centre for the Arts also attended. All toured the two classrooms available to be leased to the broader community.

It was noted that the available space is not barrier-free and has to be accessed by stairs. The representative of the NIA Centre for the Arts felt the space had potential for programming but that cost to rent and fit out the space was a barrier.

### **Findings**

Across the needs assessment, youth services were listed as a priority for the community by service providers, the general public, and youth themselves. Providing new safe locations in the community for youth to access services and programs with dedicated professionals for support and socialization were indicated as a local program priority. Youth indicated an interest in working on the programming for the space to ensure that it meets the needs of the local population.

City of Toronto staff felt that two classrooms in the former Vaughan Road Academy were a good space to temporarily program for youth in the community, in particular as the location has a natural safe access method. The rest of the school is not accessible from the program area, except in the case of a fire, whereupon a second exit is provided through the school.

The classrooms themselves are large and bright and could be programmed as a resource/educational centre and as a safe place for youth to gather and socialize away from the street. While the classroom space is not barrier-free, the youth programming at Maria Shchuka Library is, and the classroom space has the potential, with appropriate staff and other resourcing to be an alternative local space in the community to support youth, in particular youth who are not currently attending school during the day, or face other challenges to accessing other locations in the community. There is an opportunity for this pilot to create a network of spaces with different safety and access characteristics to provide rich programming opportunities to the unique barriers that youth in this area face.

The importance of community space for youth is highlighted in the Review of the Roots of Youth Violence report published in 2008. It noted that community spaces can foster greater community cohesion as spaces can create room "space for unhurried conversations, regular discussions, forums and more casual gatherings to explore the design and delivery of community-generated policy proposals, activities and programs."<sup>2</sup>

This community has seen a rise in violence in the past year, with several fatal shootings in the vicinity of Oakwood and Vaughan since January 2020. The activation of this community space for youth has the possibility to address Province of Ontario's Roots of Violence Review's recommendation to create "community hubs, wherever possible anchored in school facilities" as a strategy of dealing with violence in communities by providing locations for socialization and community connection. Having spaces available with appropriate programs leads to outcomes that include reduced contact with law enforcement.

Activation of this space with dedicated staff would help the City to address low incomes in a highly employed community, improved access to high-quality programming for youth has the potential to support youth in educational attainment, training and employment support, and support recommendations of the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Toronto Youth Equity Strategy. The City of Toronto's Youth Equity Strategy specifically endorses spaces that promote free social, educational attainment and training/employability supports for your most vulnerable to serious violence and crime. It also addresses the City of Toronto's Action Plan to Confront Anti-Black Racism Action 7.1 which calls on the City to improve "spaces in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of Black residents".

The activation of the space is contingent on securing an agency for programming and operating the space which would happen with the support of City of Toronto staff. The

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.children.gov.on.ca/htdocs/English/documents/youthandthelaw/rootsofyouthviolence-vol1.pdf>, page 304



activation of the space is also contingent upon reaching agreements with Toronto Lands Corporation and Toronto District School Board.

### **Next Steps**

A multi-year pilot for a community space for youth is proposed. Youth outcomes are improved with stable funding and a consistent staff and agency approach to develop meaningful and supportive relationships with youth. A multi-year pilot will also allow for fulsome evaluation.

Staff will pursue a request to lease the space with Toronto Lands Corporation and from the Toronto District School Board in anticipation of the permits and lease of the space in early 2021. Any lease will be required to fulfill the lease terms of the Toronto District School Board and the Toronto Lands Corporation. This space is still available for programming at the writing of this report.

Staff from Social Development, Finance and Administration will build a funding model that can sustainably maintain a program in this community. This work is contingent on funding and agreement from the Toronto District School Board and Toronto Lands Corporation for the space. Staff are also recommending that efforts be made to secure an appropriate permanent location for local community space, such as through future redevelopments in the community.

### **CONTACT**

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### **SIGNATURE**

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Denise Andrea Campbell, Executive Director  
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### **ATTACHMENTS**

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Appendix A - Table of Select Variables for the Oakwood and Vaughan Area Aggregated from the Dissemination Areas for Statistics Canada 2016 Household Survey