

## Notes for Deputation to Infrastructure and Environment Committee

### Downtown Yonge BIA; Mark Garner, COO & Executive Director

January 11, 2021

- Thank you for the opportunity to present today. The Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Area represents more than 2,000 businesses and their employees, as well as the broader community of residents, students and visitors in the heart of downtown Toronto.
- We care, deeply, about Yonge Street, and have taken an active interest in planning for its future.
- The Downtown Yonge BIA has undertaken extensive work in this regard, including a large public consultation called *Yonge Love*. We surveyed thousands of people from a wide range of backgrounds and demographics, to understand their views on what they want Yonge Street to be.
- From *Yonge Love*, and through extensive consultations with our members and local residents, five key priorities have emerged.
- These priorities are to:
  - Make Downtown Yonge a highly walkable neighbourhood;
  - Make Yonge Street a truly flexible street;
  - Make Yonge Street a truly complete street;
  - Make Downtown Yonge an always vibrant neighbourhood; and
  - Make Downtown Yonge a truly inclusive neighbourhood.
- In developing our position on the yongeTOMorrow initiative, we also considered proposals through another lens, that we call the “Three E’s”: Ethics, Evidence, Economics.
  - Ethics: planning for Yonge Street needs to be balanced, taking into account the needs of the entire community. That includes business, retail, restaurants, entertainment, employers, employees, residents, visitors, students, pedestrians, commuters, motorists – everyone who values this iconic street and gathering place.
  - Evidence-based: plans must not be ideological; they need to be based on empirical facts, such as transportation modeling, traffic data, infrastructure design and function, as well as surveys and other consultations from many different viewpoints.
  - Economics: Downtown Yonge is critically important to the Toronto economy. Planning for Yonge Street must ensure that the neighbourhood remains healthy from business, residential, entertainment and tourism perspectives. This is even more critical as we consider pandemic recovery, with initiatives such as Restore the Core and Bring Back Mainstreet providing essential direction.

- Based on these considerations, as a lens for our extensive consultations, we have developed a set of principles as key to guiding Yonge Street development going forward.
- Fundamentally, we see Yonge as a “flex street” – temporarily closed to vehicular traffic for major festivals, events and other activations to boost the economy – such as Luminato, Buskerfest and North by Northeast – but otherwise open as a regular roadway.
- There are many examples of successful flex streets around the world. Toronto’s own Market Street. Dundas Place in London, Ontario. Exhibition Road in London, England. New York City’s “Summer Streets” program, which temporarily shuts down streets for pedestrian-focused events, while the rest of the time they handle regular vehicle traffic as important business arteries.
- I want to be clear: the Downtown Yonge BIA and its members **do not support permanent closures of any section of Yonge Street.**
- We have made this point categorically clear in all of our submissions and interactions with the yongeTOmorrow initiative. Anyone who suggests that there is widespread support in the business community for permanent closures of Yonge is, frankly, delusional. Or worse, deceitful.
- We are concerned that this misrepresentation has compromised the entire EA process. There are one-sided websites and consultations using the “yongeTOmorrow” name outside of the formal Transportation process, aiming to gain support for a design that has major negative impacts on the economics of the area, and/or would be impossible to deliver because they are built around unrealistic conceptual designs.
- This committee will have received numerous letters from multiple stakeholders – from small businesses, large property owners, residents – all advocating against permanent closures of Yonge.
- We have expressed concerns that these views are being ignored, and recommendations being put forward are based on a pre-determined, narrow, ideological agenda. We recognize that some advocates passionately believe in their vision of an eternally car-free Yonge Street. We do not share that vision.
- We don’t share that vision because it is deeply flawed. Permanent pedestrian-only closures would have serious negative consequences both economically and operationally.
  - Eliminating vehicular traffic would be catastrophic for business, significantly curtailing the number of customers and their interactions in the area.
  - Deliveries, waste management and other services for downtown businesses would be severely hampered.
  - Permanently closing sections of Yonge would also exacerbate congestion on other downtown north-south arteries, as well as the east-west streets intersecting with the closed sections.

- Events and activations, by definition, take place during a finite time period. Yonge St. must remain open for regular vehicular traffic at other times.
- I want to make it clear we are not advocating for the status quo. Our principles include a number of significant changes, including widening sidewalks to improve the pedestrian experience and enable seasonal patios.
- At the same time, we also want to make sure that broader considerations are also part of the planning process. Re-designing Yonge Street will be a generational opportunity to upgrade underground systems – such as water and power – and this needs to be taken into account in all planning decisions.
- In addition to physical changes, it is also imperative that designs for Yonge Street address existing and ongoing community safety issues. That means cleaning, social outreach, and other proactive services to ensure a sense of safety and comfort for residents, workers, students, and visitors alike.
- Yonge Street is indisputably the most important and iconic street in the City of Toronto – and maybe even all of Canada. It is “Canada’s Main Street.” The downtown section of Yonge is the heart of our city – literally and figuratively. It has long been central to Toronto’s economy and culture, and a place where Torontonians and visitors convene.
- As we plan for the future of this vital artery, we need to get it right – for *everyone*. And that means flexibility, to accommodate multiple purposes and to continue to adjust as needed in years to come.
- Thank you.