



Setting the Stage:

Encouraging Transit Supportive Places on the Finch West LRT Corridor



METROLINX

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The “Setting the Stage: Encouraging Transit Supportive Places on the Finch West LRT Corridor” report was prepared by:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Finch Avenue West corridor rests at the threshold of significant change. The proposed LRT will deliver convenient and reliable higher-order transit to area residents, businesses and institutions – improving connections across the corridor and beyond. This investment will create a generational opportunity to reimagine the shape and character of the corridor, address long-standing issues, and welcome new residents and businesses.

Demographically, the area is changing. The population is aging and households are getting smaller. Employment is shifting away from traditional manufacturing and while average private household incomes are increasing across the corridor, they are still lower than the city average. The corridor also has concentrated areas of high social need. Neighbourhoods along the corridor have been identified as Neighbourhood Improvement Areas and face a range of issues including above average unemployment and low income rates.

The corridor hosts a mature real estate market with strong demand for single-family grade-related homes and a developing market for high-rise building types. Construction of the LRT is expected to accelerate the demand and eventually lead to the creation of a market for high-rise buildings in the corridor.

Goals and Objectives of the Study

The Study purpose is to identify approaches to maximizing the benefits of investment in LRT infrastructure along the Finch Avenue West corridor. It includes a detailed analysis of the real estate market conditions along the corridor and a review of the existing planning framework, physical conditions, and demographic trends. A series of case studies from jurisdictions across North America highlight approaches to leveraging LRT investments. Together, this analysis and these case studies aim to identify those areas along the corridor that may experience market pressure, provide planning and public realm considerations to support reinvestment and to remedy social need along the corridor.

Key Considerations for the Finch Avenue West Corridor

Below is a summary of the key considerations from this study for the overall corridor. The considerations are a result of information gathering and analysis, a detailed real estate market conditions analysis, case study review, collaboration with City Staff, and a review of existing conditions along the Finch Avenue West corridor.

Market

- The market demand for residential uses, and to lesser extent office and commercial uses, are expected to improve with the new LRT service. Demand will be strongest in the areas that are within walking distance of a station, typically 500 metres.

- Strong increases in the value of single family homes, and other ground oriented housing types along the corridor, as well as land transactions and high density development applications and activity, are all early signals that demand may be maturing for higher density residential formats in Emery Village and at the intersection of Finch Avenue West and Keele Street.
- The Thistletown site, Albion Mall, and Humber College also offer opportunities to respond to market influences generated by new transit investment, however these sites are less advanced in their planning and more complex from an ownership and development perspective.
- Not all areas along the corridor will respond in a similar or consistent manner due to other issues such as the existing land use and ownership pattern.
- Overall, the Finch Avenue West corridor market is maturing at a steady rate. The LRT will have the impact of accelerating the market in terms of pricing and demand but only in the areas where the development and ownership patterns are aligned with planning and market forces.

Physical/Public Realm

- The public realm along the Finch Avenue West corridor is often deficient where many stretches of the corridor are abutted by 'back-lotted' residential properties that offer little amenity to passers-by, sound walls have been added to mitigate noise caused by vehicle traffic, and pedestrian bridges have been installed in some areas to cross wide arterial roads. The corridor would benefit from the preparation of a detailed public realm plan in tandem with LRT design to identify streetscape improvements along Finch Avenue

West, with regards to pedestrian crossings, improved comfort, landscaping, street furniture, way-finding, tree canopy and integration with active retail and/or residential uses.

- In addition, given that neighbourhood streets typically follow a broken grid pattern that defers to the contours of the landscape, resulting in a deficient public realm, it would be beneficial to conduct a detailed public realm analysis that identifies opportunities to improve connections between proposed LRT stops and neighbourhood destinations (area schools, institutions, community centres, or parks) by upgrading pedestrian and cycling infrastructure as required.
- To further complement the proposed LRT, there should be consideration for ways to implement safe and continuous cycling infrastructure throughout the corridor and to the broader cycling network.
- The Finch Avenue West corridor includes generous amounts of preserved natural open space; however these lands are not considered parkland. A key consideration for the corridor includes the potential exploration of opportunities to better use the hydro corridor in ways that provide added amenities to areas where intensification is anticipated, including parks and pedestrian and bicycle trails.
- Currently, access to the ravines along the corridor remains inconsistent. Enhancing these connections will promote access to ravines within the corridor, providing more public amenities to residents.

Socio-Economic

- The corridor faces increased rates of unemployment, low income rates, and reduced affordability and also has reduced walkability to community meeting places, green spaces, and healthy food stores. Generally, the issues that may be most directly resolved as a result of the LRT are related to access (i.e. proximity to green spaces, employment opportunities, walkability, etc.).
- The corridor will benefit most through comprehensive planning and the extension of connections into the adjacent neighbourhoods including feeder bus routes, pedestrian connections to the Humber River Valley, parks, mixed use areas, and community spaces. The coordination of this comprehensive planning and the provision of a planning and public realm framework which serves to support the LRT and surrounding neighbourhoods will better address the issues faced along the corridor.
- In addition to larger-scale initiatives, a number of key considerations identified in the study analysis can also address these issues. They include: making Community Benefit Agreements mandatory for all infrastructure projects over a certain dollar value; consideration for local business supports (e.g. free advertising on transit vehicles, design contests and other forms of outreach to schools, seniors' centres, community groups etc.) and provision of support during construction.

Planning

- **Establish a Vision for the Finch Avenue West Corridor:** The establishment of a strong vision for the corridor could help shape related decisions surrounding built form, character, density, capital improvements, public realm improvements, community service facilities and parkland dedication.
- **Ensure Appropriate Density, Form, and Character of Development:** Future intensification along the corridor would benefit from a careful consideration of the unique physical characteristics of the Finch Avenue West corridor, which include: unique topography with prominent ravines and natural features; wide right-of-way (Finch Avenue West has a planned ROW of 36m); LRT stop spacing that is wider compared pre-war streetcar routes; tower-in-the-park sites that share the characteristics outlined in the Mayor's Tower Renewal report; and, surrounding stable neighbourhoods.
- **Consider Transit-Supportive Densities:** Consider transit-supportive densities in certain locations along the corridor which could include minimum heights and/or densities. There is also the potential to reserve areas along the corridor for higher density built forms (e.g. mid-rise and taller buildings) once the market becomes favourable for this type of development.
- **Opportunities for Infill or Redevelopment:** There are opportunities for increased density and intensification through infill and/or redevelopment, particularly around existing malls, in Mixed Use Area sites (first priority) and some apartment sites (second priority). Recent residential intensification

efforts in the city have led to increased benefits for existing and future residents.

- **Provision of a Robust Public Realm:** A comprehensive Public Realm Plan that considers key origins and destinations within 500m of the corridor would provide a framework for the full integration of the LRT into the existing and planned communities. A Public Realm plan can provide guidance on the design of streets, parks, open spaces, bicycle routes, public art and community buildings so that they are responsive to the local context and to community interests and needs.
- **Integrate Open Space Planning:** Intensification within the corridor would need to be supported by appropriate public parks and open spaces that provide amenity to existing and new residents. Acquiring new parkland through development, investing in existing parks and open space, and providing better access to existing natural spaces and/or schoolyards are all options that could be considered.
- **Support of Employment Uses:** The preservation of existing and creation of new employment uses within the Finch Avenue West corridor should be supported. To achieve this support, a comprehensive review of existing and projected uses should be conducted, along with combined recommendations for how the related transportation, public realm, urban design, and economic development initiatives considered for the corridor can be tailored.
- **Area-Specific Considerations:** Given the scale of transportation infrastructure investment planned for the Keele-Finch intersection, market interest and private development interest is anticipated to be higher at this location. Comprehensive planning exercises could help shape and support this investment, review of the surrounding land-uses, transportation network, open space system, servicing, and community services and facilities required to support this investment.