



Walk Toronto comments on TOcore Proposed Downtown Plan - PG22.1

To: The Chair and Members of the Planning and Growth Management Committee

From: Walk Toronto – Steering Committee

Date: Sept. 6, 2017

SUMMARY

- Downtown's sidewalks are too narrow for the large volume of pedestrians that use them
- Walk Toronto strongly supports the proposed requirement to provide a 6 meter setback for new buildings (Attachment 1, sections 6.9 and 6.11)
- However, this requirement is undermined by section 6.12 (exception for continuous street wall)
- Walk Toronto recommends removing section 6.12
- Walk Toronto further recommends a new section explicitly stating a goal of a straight 3.0 meter unobstructed pedestrian clearway (not including furniture/tree or marketing/patio zones) on downtown main street sidewalks, with a minimum of 2.1 meters of clearway if 3 meters is not possible.

WALKING IS THE DOMINANT FORM OF TRANSPORTATION FOR DOWNTOWN RESIDENTS

Toronto's core is dominated by pedestrians. In the past 20 years an enormous number of people have moved into the core, and large number of business, entertainment and retail destinations have blossomed, attracting huge numbers of pedestrians. Walking is the dominant mode of transportation for people living in the core, and for people visiting it. The core must make pedestrians its priority.

Pedestrian traffic volumes on streets such as Yonge can be many times that of motor vehicles. However, the design of Toronto's downtown arterials still adheres to outdated principles. A disproportionate share the public right-of-way is allocated to vehicles, which are generally given at least two lanes in each direction. We think it is reasonable for TOcore to set as a standard for the pedestrian clearway on downtown arterials a minimum width of 3.0 meters— which is the equivalent of a single vehicle lane.

Walk Toronto strongly supports the goals expressed in the TOCore plan to create a comfortable, engaging, vibrant, sunlit and safe walking environment

SETBACKS

Toronto's downtown sidewalks were built at a time when the population was much smaller. They are often too narrow to safely, comfortably and attractively cope with the current volume of pedestrians downtown. With a few exceptions, there is not a lot of opportunity to widen sidewalks by taking up space on the street, as there is demand from vehicles, bicycles and delivery services.

It is therefore vital that, as part of the evolution of the core, all new buildings in the downtown core are set back at least 6 meters from the street curb to allow space for a wide pedestrian clearway between street furniture and trees on one side, and cafes, marketing displays, and other commercial purposes on the other.

Consequently, items 6.9 and 6.11 are vital in making this requirement.

However, these items are then undermined by item 6.12, which states that new buildings do not require a setback if there are existing buildings on the block that do not have it. This will be the case in many parts of the core, and it provides an opportunity that will be used to undermine and circumvent the requirement for setbacks. It opens the possibility of using setbacks as part of deal-making, as a bargaining chip that can be given up in exchange for other priorities.

Even where parts of a block are close to the sidewalk, if a new building is replacing existing buildings, creating a setback will create "breathing room" on the sidewalk and create space for additional vibrancy.

To a certain extent, the placement of most street furniture is flexible. A spacious setback provides the City with an opportunity to move some amenities such as benches, planters, newspaper boxes, waste receptacles, bike parking fixtures etc. from parts of the street where the sidewalk is subject to space constraints, to the more generous area created by a setback. Thus, the setback can improve walking conditions on the entire block — not just the area it occupies.

STREETWALL CONSIDERATIONS

The concern for consistency along a block is misguided. The downtown is already highly mixed and diverse in its form – there is no harm in having a mixture of types of buildings and setbacks along a same block, and a great deal of benefit that feeds directly into the plan’s stated goals of walking comfort, safety, variety and vibrancy.

While it is true that setting back a new development may initially create a sawtooth streetwall effect, this is usually an intermediate phase. The construction of additional developments that are also set back will be in harmony with each other. Over time, the entire streetwall may be shifted back, opening up the street. We should be prepared to let our city evolve.

On the other hand, if historic streetwalls are rigidly protected, Toronto’s narrow downtown arterials — which may have been of an appropriate width in the Victorian period — will not be able to serve the 21st century needs of North America’s fourth largest city.

Walk Toronto therefore recommends that Section 6.12 should be eliminated.

PEDESTRIAN CLEARWAY

In addition, to ensure safety, mobility and accessibility for the large volume of downtown pedestrians, a new section should be added in an appropriate location in section 6 explicitly stating a goal of a straight 3.0 meter unobstructed pedestrian clearway (not including furniture/ tree or marketing/patio zones) on downtown main street sidewalks, with a minimum of 2.1 meters of clearway if 3 meters is not possible.