

## ATTACHMENT 7: TPH Transform Yonge Health Considerations

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### REimagining Yonge Proposal Detailed Briefing Note: Health Considerations

#### Issue

- In 2018, the General Manager, Transportation Services recommended City Council endorse a design for how Yonge Street could be made pedestrian and cycling supportive, in light of the fact that Yonge Street is at the end of its lifecycle and is therefore being reconstructed. City Council deferred consideration to permit the TTC to consider the long-term implications for surface level buses.
- In 2020, Transportation Services will respond to direction from the March 2018 City Council meeting at the Infrastructure and Environment Committee with updated traffic and transit analysis.
  - Transportation Services continues to recommend the Transform Yonge alternative, in alignment with the March 2018 preferred alternative and the Complete Streets Guidelines.
  - The redesign will include wider sidewalks, centred landscape medians, enhanced pedestrian crossings that improve safety, overall improvements to the public realm, and cycle tracks on Yonge Street.
- Toronto Public Health (TPH) is working with Transportation Services to identify the potential health benefits associated with the Transform Yonge alternative as compared to the Enhance Yonge, Transform Beecroft option.
- This note is intended to provide an overview of the TPH position and relevant evidence to support the proposal from Transportation Services.

#### Decision History

- On January 5, 2018, the General Manager, Transportation Services submitted a report to the Public Works and Infrastructure Committee on the REimagining Yonge Municipal Class Environmental Assessment Study (EA).
  - The report included recommendations related to the design and reconstruction of Yonge Street, as a result of the EA initiated in 2016.
  - As part of Stage One of the EA, the preliminary proposed design was that of Transform Yonge, which included recommendations to fully reconstruct Yonge Street (i.e., wider sidewalks, additional safe protected pedestrian crossings, enhanced streetscape, and cycle tracks).
- In May 2017, the Public Works and Infrastructure Committee directed that further review be undertaken to assess the installation of cycling facilities on Doris Avenue and/or Beecroft Road, rather than Yonge Street, and to conduct additional consultation.

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- The results of the additional analysis identified Beecroft as the preliminary preferred alternative. This option is referred to as Enhance Yonge and Transform Beecroft.
- On March 26, 2018, the General Manager, Transportation Services made recommendations to City Council that considered two options:
  1. Implementing the original Transform Yonge proposal (i.e., enhanced pedestrian crossings and cycle tracks on Yonge Street); or,
  2. Implementing Enhance Yonge and Transform Beecroft, an alternative that would construct dedicated cycle tracks on Beecroft Road, maintain traffic capacity in North York Centre (i.e., number of traffic lanes), and address state of repair issues on Yonge Street.
- At that time, Transportation Services recommended Transform Yonge as the preferred approach, noting that this option would significantly enhance road safety and the public realm, would cost less than the Beecroft option, and could be implemented within a shorter timeframe.
- City Council deferred consideration of the report to permit the TTC Board to consider the long-term implications of the recommendations for surface level buses and the overall City/York Region transit planning.
- The General Manager, Transportation Services, is expected to make recommendations to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee in March 2020 on the plan for Yonge Street, in light of further analysis and input from the TTC.

### **Role of Toronto Public Health**

- The role of TPH is to provide evidence-informed health-based recommendations, in alignment with the TPH mandate.
- TPH is mandated through provincial legislation to follow the *Ontario Public Health Standards: Requirements for Programs, Services and Accountability*, set by the provincial government.
  - In 2018, the Ontario Ministry of Health released new standards.
  - The standards provide TPH with a stronger mandate to address important public health issues, such as consideration for how the built environment impacts health, and re-affirmed TPH's role in assessing population health through identification of health trends and preventive health practices.

### **Evidence on Healthy Design and the Built Environment**

**The Transform Yonge option reflects evidence-based design principles that promote health, such as the Complete Streets Guidelines, Active City Principles and the Healthy Development Index. It has many elements that facilitate physical activity and promote safety, especially for vulnerable road users.**

Chronic diseases are leading contributors to morbidity and mortality in Toronto. Physical activity levels have been shown to reduce mortality from chronic diseases. Active living is about incorporating more physical activity in our day to day lives. Evidence indicates that short amounts of activity, such as walking to and from public transit, and activity

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throughout the day, can combat risks of prolonged sitting and other types of physical inactivity<sup>1</sup>. The way cities are designed can influence an individual's behavior and ability to be active throughout the day.

- The most effective approach for influencing physical activity rates is likely one that applies multiple interventions to different aspects and features of the built environment<sup>2</sup>.
- The broad concept of "healthy design," the notion of designing communities that make it easier for people to live healthy lives, has been linked to positive health, social, and economic outcomes<sup>3</sup>.
- The Active City Principles<sup>4</sup> provide high level guidance for urban design and built environment elements that support healthy and active living. The principles include concepts such as:
  - Proximity (Access to destinations and amenities),
  - Connectivity (Routes through the built environment),
  - Quality (Design elements and effects) and
  - Equity (Addressing health inequities by design).
- High street connectivity in an area can reduce travel distances which may increase the convenience and variety of routes for non-motorized transport, such as walking or cycling<sup>5</sup>.
- Some jurisdictions, including the City of Toronto, have adopted planning approaches, such as "complete streets," which are intended to promote safe street access and functionality for all users and have been linked with positive health benefits<sup>5</sup>.
- Research indicates that compact neighbourhoods with walkable streets and a variety of destinations within walking distance of housing are associated with more walking, lower rates of obesity, and higher rates of physical activity<sup>6</sup>.
- Evidence has also demonstrated that enhanced walking and cycling infrastructure is linked with improved physical activity levels. For example, the quality and connectivity of sidewalks can have an impact on how often a person walks<sup>7</sup>.
- Concerns regarding safety can be a barrier to active living, but research indicates that as the number of people walking or cycling increases, the rate of collisions between motorists and pedestrians/cyclists decreases (the "safety in numbers" phenomenon)<sup>8</sup>.
- A streetscape that is designed for all users has been demonstrated to improve safety and convenience of travelling on foot or by bicycle, and has been linked with making public spaces more inviting<sup>9</sup>.
- Built environment elements and quality open spaces that draw people out to interact with others and with the natural environment have been linked to good health, less stress and fewer depressive symptoms<sup>10</sup>.
- Children are more likely to use active transportation if they are close to their school and there are safe route options<sup>11</sup>.
- For older adults who have health and mobility issues, having benches or seating options available is important. They act as rest stops and can be places for older adults to interact with one another<sup>6</sup>.
- Traffic calming, including narrowing of traffic lanes, road diets and curb extensions can improve safety and perceptions of safety which inspires active transportation<sup>6</sup>. Road

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diets benefit cyclists, pedestrians, and motorists through reduced vehicle speeds, improved mobility and access, reduced collisions and injuries, and improved livability and quality of life<sup>6</sup>. Evidence suggests that narrower lanes also reduce vehicle travel speed, as the constraints of the lane compel drivers to operate more cautiously<sup>6</sup>.

### **Findings from Other Jurisdictions that have Implemented Healthy Design Features**

**Many jurisdictions are exploring the intersection of public realm, design, city planning, and health outcomes. They have found public health benefits are associated with design features that promote walking and cycling.**

As society has moved to more urban environments and more people are living closer together, a focus has been brought to the role the built environment plays in day to day living and to all aspects of how cities are designed.

- There is evidence to suggest that the presence of retail and mixed-use design encourages active transportation. For example, case studies in downtown Boston, New York, and Hong Kong demonstrated that pedestrian commuters were more likely to choose a route with a high proportion of pedestrian-oriented retail frontage, and that people are more likely to walk or bike when the route contained retailers<sup>6</sup>.
- A study on the City of Barcelona's active transportation policies evaluated the health and economic benefits using a Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT)<sup>12</sup>. The study found that policies promoting active transportation had a considerable impact on health over the study period, which led to a decrease in pedestrian and cyclist injury rates and the number of deaths.
- Studies from the Netherlands and Germany noted better facilities for walking and cycling and street design sensitive to the needs of non-motorists led to the promotion of walking and cycling<sup>13</sup> .
- There is also evidence to suggest that addition of cycling infrastructure has been associated with increases in retail sales in some corridors. For example, the New York City Department of Transportation found after the implementation of a protected bike lane on 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue, that local businesses saw an increase in retail sales<sup>14</sup>. Other case studies have noted similar findings. Others have found that economic impacts are not immediate and suggest this requires further investigation<sup>15</sup>.

### **Proposed Transform Yonge Option - Healthy Design Features**

**The Transform Yonge option provides greater connectivity, a diverse mix of land use and densities that encourage social interaction and invite active living better than the Enhance Yonge and Transform Beecroft option.**

While both options reflect evidence-based design principles, such as the Complete Streets Guidelines and the Active City Principles that promote health, enable physical activity and improve safety, the Transform Yonge option offers a more robust design that best

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incorporates the principles of importance for promoting health, particularly for vulnerable road users.

- This option will provide flexible, high quality spaces that encourage different activities and a variety of users.
- The Transform Yonge option includes several design elements that promote health including a centred landscaped median, wider sidewalks, enhanced pedestrian crossings to improve safety, and cycle tracks.
- Additionally, Yonge Street provides an advantage of better service proximity, density, land use mix and direct connectivity for pedestrians, transit and cycling.
- Transform Yonge will offer wider sidewalks, and streetscape animation providing spaces and places for people to gather, while providing a variety of destinations within walking or cycling distance more than the Enhance Yonge and Transform Beecroft option.
- Transform Yonge has three transit stations within the study area, and enhanced walking and cycling infrastructure will improve the first and last mile access.
- Improved and redesigned pedestrian crossings, street furniture and the addition of greening on Yonge will promote safe, active spaces for all ages and abilities and provide spaces for rest and shade within the streetscape.
- The Transform Yonge option creates a protected bike route along an arterial route to connect multi-modal networks and connects with local bike routes to enable longer travel routes via active transportation.
- If implemented as proposed, it is expected that the Transform Yonge approach will increase the likelihood that individuals will walk and use cycling infrastructure in the public realm. This would promote a vibrant, healthy community in the Yonge Street corridor, something that is also supported in the North York Centre Secondary Plan, and the Official Plan.
- Overall, the proposed Transform Yonge approach also reflects the general views of Toronto residents who took part in a 2012 survey<sup>16</sup> by Toronto Public Health, expressing strong preference for more walkable and transit supportive neighbourhoods. Three quarters of survey participants strongly preferred a walkable neighbourhood over an auto-oriented one, and a majority expressed a strong preference for street designs that allowed them to walk, cycle and take transit. Residents in more walkable neighbourhoods appeared to have healthier lifestyles with higher levels of physical activity and drove fewer kilometers each week<sup>16</sup>.

### **Alignment of Transform Yonge Option with City of Toronto Policy**

**The overarching goals of the proposed Transform Yonge option for the redesign of Yonge Street related to promoting vibrancy in the public realm, providing cycling infrastructure connectivity, and improving pedestrian amenities aligns with a broad selection of current City of Toronto policies and encompasses the goals set out in the Ontario Public Health Standards (OPHS).**

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It is recognized that a good mix of social, political, economic, environment and health policies are needed to positively influence levels of physical activity. The overarching goals of the proposed Transform Yonge option for the redesign of Yonge Street related to promoting vibrancy in the public realm, improving pedestrian amenities and providing cycling infrastructure connectivity also align with other City of Toronto Policies.

- The proposal would support the Vision Zero Road Safety Plan (2016) by the provision of additional and redesigned pedestrian crossings. The Vision Zero Road Safety Plan is focused on reducing traffic-related fatalities and serious injuries on Toronto's streets.
- The redesign also aligns with the City's Complete Street Guidelines, which were included in Toronto's Official Plan, adopted by City Council in August 2014.
- The "Transform Yonge" proposal would also align with the commitment to connect, grow, and renew infrastructure for Toronto's cycling routes through the Council-approved Cycling Network Plan (2019).
- The principles in the Transform Yonge option are also aligned with a number of existing City of Toronto strategies including Resilient Toronto, the Toronto Seniors Strategy, and TransformTO.

### **TPH Recommendation for REimagining Yonge**

**The proposed Transform Yonge option for the redesign of Yonge Street is the preferred option over the Enhance Yonge and Transform Beecroft option as it incorporates a wider variety of design elements that are known to promote health, including density and destinations, improved connectivity with transit and spaces, wider sidewalks and spaces for people of all ages and abilities to interact.**

The Transform Yonge option provides a compelling argument for how healthy streets could be built. The option includes the building blocks for healthy street design and incorporates the Active City principles, including; density and destinations within a mixed use environment, a vibrant and engaging streetscape including greening, shade, seating and places and spaces to interact, multi-use options for users of all ages and abilities, and a regional arterial protected bike path fed by local networks. It also provides improved first and last mile connections for three transit stations, and improves safety for everyone with wider sidewalks, redesigned crossings and signaled intersections. The combination of these elements is what can influence health and active living decisions for residents and visitors. A redesign of this magnitude has the opportunity to change how people live their lives, gives them the safer option for active living and the opportunity for improved health outcomes.

- The opportunity to re-design a major arterial road such as Yonge Street is rare, and it would be beneficial for the City to take advantage and optimize its health-promoting potential.
- Given the existing research related to the health-promoting elements of the built environment, TPH supports the Transform Yonge proposal because:

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- It will provide opportunities for active modes of transportation, such as walking and cycling;
- It provides the opportunity for people to choose the healthier option; and,
- It will increase the overall health-promoting potential in the corridor for generations.
- Overall, the proposed redesign of Yonge Street through the Transform Yonge approach would support a vibrant community and promote walking, cycling and other active modes of transportation.
- Toronto Public Health will continue to support the efforts of TS to incorporate healthy design elements into this initiative, consistent with its mandate under the OPHS to promote healthy natural and built environments that increase opportunities for physical activity and improve air quality.

**Completed March 2, 2020**

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