



Secretariat, Economic & Community Development Committee
Toronto City Hall
100 Queen Street West
Toronto, ON M5H 2N2

July 5, 2022

Attention: Matthew Green
Via email: ecdc@toronto.ca

Letter in Support of Downtown East Action Plan

Dear Chair and Members of the Economic & Community Development Committee,

This letter is submitted in response to Agenda Item EC31.21 for consideration on July 6, 2022 regarding the Downtown East Action Plan.

Downtown Yonge Business Improvement Areas (DYBIA) - with a membership of some 2,000 businesses and property owners and a combined commercial property value of over \$7.2 billion – is one of the City's larger BIAs. We have been actively investing in a safe and inclusive neighbourhood since 2015, notably through collaborative partnerships that include social agencies, businesses, police and other community stakeholders.

To start, we support the work being done by the Downtown East Action Plan to address complex and entrenched social challenges - but at the same time we wish to highlight the increasing urgency of this work.

We furthermore want to emphasize the urgency of Recommendation 2, and specifically Recommendation 2a:

2. City Council request the Province of Ontario, (particularly the Ministries of Health; Children, Community and Social Services; the Solicitor General; the Attorney General, and Municipal Affairs and Housing), and the Government of Canada (particularly Health Canada; Department of Justice Canada; the Public Health Agency of

Canada and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) collaborate and directly partner with the City and other stakeholders to establish and implement the following priorities from the Downtown East Action Plan:

a. Health, including mental health, investments both capital and operating, that align with the critical needs of the city's vulnerable communities, particularly wraparound responses and options for those experiencing mental health, developmental disabilities or substance use challenges.

Provincial support to meet the critical needs of vulnerable populations, and address neighbourhood issues of both safety and inclusion is very much needed. The pandemic has only magnified this need.

In Downtown Yonge, we prioritize the need for a Safe and Inclusive Neighbourhood – one that tries to address street-based poverty, crime and homelessness in a constructive, root cause manner rather than simply relying on an enforcement model. Our position and approach are laid out in our *Safe & Inclusive Streets Strategy 2017*, a document that underscores our belief in collaboration across all community stakeholders to address issues of shared concern. Our commitment to these principles is reflected in our on-street crisis and outreach programs, as well as ongoing research and resources, a full description of which can be accessed at <https://downtownyonge.com/safe-inclusive/>

Since 2016, DYBIA has piloted several different partnered outreach initiatives, which culminated in the establishment of a full-time crisis outreach team called the Community Engagement Team (CET) in Summer 2018. Before the outbreak of Covid19 in March 2020, the CET had engaged close to 7,000 individuals on-street in Downtown Yonge and responded to more than 550 crisis calls from local businesses and social agencies. A 22% referral rate was achieved to the services that clients were offered or requested.

During the pandemic, we pivoted to a partnered outreach model to best use the outreach resources available. The program works with a range of programs in Downtown Yonge to provide several collaborative outreach sessions a week on-street. By the end of June 2022, our partnered outreach program had undertaken 69 weeks of partnered outreach, usually with four or five sessions weekly. The CET's partners include: the Community Safety Team at the Bond emergency shelter; the Multi-Disciplinary Outreach team (MDOT); the harm reduction outreach team from The Works at Toronto Public Health; the City's Streets to Homes team; the TTC Special Constables outreach team; and the Neighbourhood Community Officers from 51 and 52 Divisions of the Toronto Police Service.

As a business community, we understand and acknowledge the need to provide support and resources to the neighbourhood's most vulnerable community members. Mental health and addiction services are one of the most common and acute needs that we see – and these are provincial jurisdictions.

Our neighbourhood is the location of not only the Bond emergency shelter which opened in Fall 2020, but also The Works supervised consumption site (which opened in 2017), as well as several social agencies and programs that work to alleviate social challenges – all of whom we partner with to find solutions to the neighbourhood's challenges.

However, while our commitment to our most vulnerable community members is unwavering, Downtown Yonge is increasingly seen as a neighbourhood that is unsafe – a serious reputational risk that compromises the health and well-being of our residents, employees, businesses, visitors and students as well as those seeking services.

The rise in behaviours related to substance use, mental illness, poverty and homelessness on-street – compounded and magnified by the pandemic – negatively impacts on perceptions of safety and inclusion of Downtown Yonge. We increasingly see open drug use, erratic and aggressive behaviours, shootings, assaults on retail and security staff in the area as well as the victimization of extremely vulnerable people who are on-street because of these same social challenges.

DYBIA has conducted an annual *Safe & Inclusive Streets Survey* since 2018, which seeks input from residents, students, business and property owners, social agencies, employees and visitors to the neighbourhood. The 2021 survey highlighted significant concerns:

- Since March 2020, 43% of respondents feel that safety in Downtown Yonge has gotten worse.
- 49% of respondents do not feel safe walking the neighbourhood between 7pm and 11pm; and 82% do not feel safe walking in the neighbourhood from 11pm to 6am.

- The main safety concerns were identified by respondents as people sleeping on the streets (81%); aggressive or erratic behaviours (78%); drunken or intoxicated behaviour (78%). A further 60% identified vandalism, graffiti and deliberate property damage as a key concern.
- While the abovementioned safety concerns are social issues and not criminal ones, we note that 30% of respondents have witnessed a violent crime in the preceding 12-month period. More than 10% reported being the victim of a property crime and five percent reported being the victim of a violent crime.
- Furthermore, business and property owners reported a higher victimization rate – more than 25% of business and property owners have been the victim of theft and 14% the victim of violent crime. A significant 50% of business and property owners have likewise witnessed a violent incident in the preceding 12-month period.

In short, we see social challenges getting worse at the same time that crime and perceptions of safety are getting worse. We believe strongly that these issues of safety and inclusion need to be tackled collaboratively and through active partnerships that include social agencies, residents' groups, police, schools and the business community.

We do not have the luxury to work in silos, but need to come together to collaborate, partner and problem-solve in the most community-driven way possible. This is true not just within a single neighbourhood, or within the City of Toronto – but between different levels of government too.

Many of our business and property owner members, as well as other community stakeholders, feel unable to talk about the negative consequences of shelter programs or harm reduction programs for fear of a potential backlash and sanction and accusations of NIMBYism. The impact of expressing concerns in public is also one of reputational risk, a deterrent to visitors and shoppers coming to Downtown Yonge and something that our members are justifiably concerned about – especially after almost two years of lockdowns.

As always, DYBIA stands ready and willing to play our part:

- We have developed a Nine-Point Action Plan based on our extensive work in safety and inclusion and append it to this letter for reference.
- We will continue to invest in crisis outreach, including the partnered programs.
- In partnership with the BIA Office at the City, we will continue to offer de-escalation training for streetfront businesses throughout Toronto.
- We will continue to participate in the Yonge-Dundas operations and leadership tables.
- We will continue to provide resources for those seeking access to social programs and to those wondering how to report different incidents.

Most of all, we will strive to ensure that Downtown Yonge – and the downtown at large – is a safe and inclusive place, for all who live, work, play, seek services, learn, shop or invest here.

Thank you for your attention and the opportunity to submit this letter.

Sincerely,



Pauline Larsen

Interim Executive Director

DOWNTOWN YONGE SAFETY AND INCLUSION: 9-POINT ACTION PLAN

1 Coordinated service delivery

End the silos – all relevant agencies and departments, at all levels, must work together

- Education, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, supportive housing and law enforcement are integral components in a holistic approach.
- Police and outreach workers must work in tandem to get people the help they need.
- Municipal, federal and provincial roles need to be interconnected – not an excuse for deflecting responsibility.

2 Wrap-around services – not harm reduction alone

Stop treating harm reduction as an isolated focus

- Harm reduction facilities are inadequate – and ineffective – without the necessary wrap-around services to support them. Otherwise this is little more than harm *deferral*, creating a “revolving door” of repeat use.
- Without effective wrap-around services, not only do individuals not get the long-term help they need, harm reduction facilities become magnets for illegal activities and negatively impact experiences in the surrounding neighbourhood.
- The recognized four pillars of harm reduction services must *all* be in place:
 1. Supervised consumption.
 2. Partnership with law enforcement, to prevent exploitation of the vulnerable and keep the surrounding community safe.
 3. Prevention and education programs, to keep usage from starting in the first place.
 4. Access to treatment – detox and rehab facilities available when needed.

3 Relocate the current SIS, terminate the Bond Hotel as a shelter

Tourism and culture are *experiential*

- Midway between a high tourist area and a university is no place for a supervised injection site. It should be moved closer to where medical support is immediately available.
- Similarly, the Bond Hotel, while necessary as temporary shelter space during the COVID-19 pandemic, is not a long-term solution. It should return to its original purpose as a hotel.
- The ongoing success of this area depends on a strong sense of safety and security for visitors, workers and residents.
- With the addition of Little Canada along with Yonge-Dundas Square, theatres and other attractions, Downtown Yonge is crucial to Toronto’s economic recovery. Image and perceptions matter – this is the worst possible place to locate permanent social services infrastructure.

4 Distribute support services across the GTA

Social services should not be concentrated in one area

- Intensive social service supports are disproportionately located in the downtown core / downtown east areas. They should be decentralized, which would enable more stable delivery and ease the strain on downtown neighbourhoods.
- Social services – including supportive housing, and addiction and mental health facilities – should be equitably distributed across the Greater Toronto Area.



5 Objective, unbiased data

Establish consistent definitions, metrics and evaluation criteria

- Create an independent agency to compile, track and analyze data about street involvement, homelessness, drug use, crime.
- Eliminate confirmation bias and self-interested data collection.
- Base decisions and actions on neutral, empirical evidence.
- Show all the data – even when it's bad news.

6 Enforce the law

No exceptions for violent crime

- Regardless of an individual's situation, criminal and provincial offences must be prosecuted.
- Social services and law enforcement must work together – helping the vulnerable while targeting and prosecuting traffickers and gang-related crime.

7 Proportional resource allocation

Unique demands in Downtown Yonge require targeted approaches

- Pre-pandemic, Downtown Yonge had more foot traffic and activity than most other parts of Toronto – requiring more resources to maintain safety, security and cleanliness.
- COVID-19 was a major tipping point, exacerbating the need for proportionally higher resources.
- Economic recovery will radiate out from the city centre.
- Clarity is needed around Section 37 funds, to ensure timely decisions based on demonstrated economic and community priorities.
- Local BIAs and other community organizations should have direct input into resource allocation decisions.

8 Measure outcomes

Track investments, objectives and results

- All levels of government are contributing public funds toward community safety programs and initiatives, but these investments are piecemeal. They need to be more strategic, targeted and cohesive.
- Accountability is critical to ensure that investments address root causes and street-related issues.
- Specific outcomes need to be tracked on an individual basis – monitoring action taken for each individual, whether it has been effective and if further intervention is needed.
- Measuring inputs – money spent, staff time, meetings/consultations, number of outreach engagements – is meaningless without also tracking whether they make a positive difference.

9 Decisions based on reality, not ideology

Treat individuals as individuals, not symbols

- Provide help for those who need it and prosecute those who exploit them.
- Engage with communities to move forward inclusively, not focusing solely on the needs of one part of the population.
- Exercise duty of care for everyone.