



To: Chair McKelvie and members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee  
From: Walk Toronto (Steering Committee)  
Date: July 6,, 2022  
Re: IE31.16 — Update on Planned Improvements to the York Beltline Trail and Kay Gardner Beltline Trail in Ward 8

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*Walk Toronto is a grassroots pedestrian advocacy group that works with various levels of government, community groups and citizens to improve walking conditions and safety in Toronto.*

## **SUPPORTING STAFF'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

Walk Toronto generally supports the recommendations made in the staff report of June 23, 2022. The improvements it proposes will result in enhancements and connectivity upgrades for one of Toronto's most important trails. Nearby neighbourhoods are undergoing densification and suffer from parkland deficiency problems. Because significant bodies of green space are not being created in the vicinity of the Beltline, it is vital that the City invest in what already exists, most notably, the York and Kay Gardner trails, which are part of the Beltline, midtown's longest linear park. Residents of the increasing number of nearby condos who do not have their own back yards will greatly benefit from improvements to the Beltline. This is especially true during heat alerts and air quality alerts, which climate change is increasing in number.

## **STREET CROSSINGS**

It is more taxing for pedestrians to make a detour to signalized crossings at points where the Beltline trail intersects streets. We therefore warmly welcome staff's proposal to install a new synchronized crossing at **Caledonia Rd.** We would prefer to see traffic signals also installed at the trail crossing at **Ronald Ave.**, but if this is considered unwise on traffic engineering grounds then a refuge island would suffice — providing that it is wide enough to comfortably accommodate wheelchairs, cargo bikes and other large devices. For the same reasons, we recommend that a refuge island also be installed on **Marlee Ave.**, which will see demand for safe mid-block crossings increase once the trail extension to the Allen Rd. has been completed. We are supportive of staff's plans to re-align the crossing at **Old Park Road.** Finally, we would like to convey our disappointment that staff plan to retain the status quo at **Bathurst St.** The current refuge island is too narrow to safely handle trail traffic, which has become heavier since the onset of the pandemic.

Wheelchair and stroller users will benefit at all crossings from staff's plans to install "curb depressions", which we assume are a more gentle form of curb cuts. When curbs are sheer (not bevelled) some trail users with disabilities are compelled to travel to the nearest traffic signals, a detour that may be

onerous. Curb depressions — in conjunction with synchronized signals or refuge islands — will enable them to safely cross mid-block.

## WAYFINDING SIGNAGE

Walk Toronto recommends that the scope of the review of wayfinding signage planned for 2023 be expanded in order to include wayfinding that is relevant to pedestrians using the Beltline trail — not just cyclists. For instance, signage that indicates average times required to cycle to various destinations should also include equivalent walking times. Also, a considerable portion of the Beltline is situated in the old City of Toronto and it is important that wayfinding be consistent along the entire trail. We therefore suggest that standards being adopted for the North York sections also be applied to any wayfinding upgrades undertaken for the trail located outside of the boundaries of the North York planning district (specifically, south of Eglinton Ave). In particular, trail maps that are posted on new information boards should include coverage of the entire trail, not just the North York portions.

## MISCELLANEOUS IMPROVEMENTS

Trip hazards on trails and walkways can be especially dangerous for elderly pedestrians or trail users with vision or balance impairments. We are supportive that PF&R staff will soon take action to remedy trip hazards on the trail

Public art enhances the walking experience, while brutalist noise walls can detract from it visually. We welcome the addition murals on the ugly Allen Rd. noise wall, as well as at points on the York Beltline Trail that will complement existing murals.

We would suggest that “cycling connections to Eglinton Crosstown LRT Stations” be conceived for active transportation as a whole. This would entail improving walkway connections for pedestrians between the Beltline and Eglinton Ave. such that are wide enough to accommodate riders of bicycles, wheelchair users, double-strollers, etc. We also note the importance of connections between the Beltline and the Allen Greenway. Together with walkways to Eglinton Ave., these will better enable residents of racialized neighbourhoods such as Lawrence Heights and Little Jamaica to access the Beltline on foot.

## INTEGRATION OF THE YORK AND GARDNER SECTIONS OF THE BELTLINE TRAIL

The Beltline Trail extends from the Barrie GO corridor (just west of Caledonia Rd.) to the Don Valley (south of the Brickworks). There is one crucial missing link at Allen Rd. where off-road trail users are required to make a detour onto city streets. We support undertaking a study that looks into the feasibility of building a pedestrian bridge or a deck over the Allen Rd. that would directly connect the Kay Gardner Beltline Trail (to the east) with the York Beltline Trail (to the west).

However, before a bridge or deck can be constructed, it will be necessary to extend the York trail using a portion of the traditional Belt Line Railway right of way situated between Marlee Ave. and the Allen Rd. For over a decade, the staff have been planning a trail connection that will exploit disused land that the City owns. Clearly, this is an improvement that will benefit Torontonians who live in various parts of the city. It is not appropriate to view this initiative as having only local significance. This should not be seen as a parkette, but rather as a major linkage in a linear park that is 9 kilometres long.

Because **the City of Toronto owns all of the land that the extension will be built on**, it will not be necessary to expropriate or obtain easements on any privately owned land. We are pleased that staff

have come to an agreement with the owners of multi-residential buildings (on the north side) whose underground parking facilities will continue to exist underneath the trail. Owners of single family homes on Fairleigh Crescent (south side) will not be able to continue with activities that encroach on publicly owned land (the contaminated soil of which is unsuitable for gardens, in any case).

It should also be noted that when the houses on Fairleigh Crescent were originally built (probably around 1950) freight such as coal was still being moved on the Belt Line rail tracks — the exact location of the extension under discussion. We believe that any disruption to homeowners caused by trail users in the future will pale into insignificance compared to the commotion caused by rail cars that use to pass just behind their back yards. When the present residents on Fairleigh Crescent purchased their homes, we assume that their real estate agent or lawyer pointed out that the land abutting their small back yards was not part of their property and might be subject to changes in land use at a future date. Consequently, it should not come as a surprise to them that staff are planning to use this **public land** in order to fill a vital missing link in the city's trail system.

Some homeowners have indicated that privacy is a concern. We believe that the current fence By-law 54-2019 permits fences up to a maximum height of 2.0 or 2.5 metres at this location. If privacy fences of greater height are desired, we are confident that an exemption could be obtained from the North York Community Council.

## **WORKING GROUP**

It has been suggested that a working group be set up in order to resolve or mitigate problems identified by members of the community. In view of the city-wide significance of the Beltline Trail, we suggest that Walk Toronto and other active transportation advocacy groups be invited to join.

At a more local level, we believe that shortcomings in communications have occurred because the Beltline extension is located on a former ward boundary that separated the Eglinton-Lawrence ward from St. Paul's. With two councillors being involved, residents of one ward may not have been properly kept up to date with plans being made in the other ward. A working group would bridge the gap.

We also recommend that meetings be limited to no more than one or two in order to adhere to staff's timeline and not hold up construction of the trail extension (which has been subject to enough delays as it is).

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