



MIDTOWN RAVINES GROUP

A consortium of residents associations working for better ecological balance and improved park use in ravines in Midtown Toronto.

March 17, 2023

Deputy Mayor Jennifer McKelvie, Chair, and Members,
Infrastructure and Environment Committee
City Council, City of Toronto

By email to: iec@toronto.ca

RE: Item 2.9 - Ravine Slope Stabilization

Councillor McKelvie, Members:

We are writing to express our support for Councillor Saxe's motion requesting that the City Solicitor, in consultation with Finance, Parks Forestry and Recreation, and other City Divisions and the TRCA, report back to the June 2023 meeting of this Committee on options for requiring beneficiaries of City/TRCA investments to either contribute to the costs of such investments or transfer ravine land to the City in lieu of contributing to the costs.

We do however have additional issues we would like to raise and which we ask be included in the issues to be addressed in the requested report. Many issues contribute to slope erosion, reaching across the mandates of multiple civic departments. Without consultation, addressing all the "downstream" issues, and breaking down administrative silos, this problem will only get worse as weather gets worse with climate change and as the city becomes denser without adequately addressing water management issues in our ravines.

1. Dealing with property owners' concerns

Our experience in Yellow Creek and Mud Creek is that property owners are reluctant to commit to spending money to rectify slope stabilization issues unless it is clear that slope collapse is a serious impending issue. Our recent experience with a slope collapse on properties on Rose Park Crescent is that property owners are more than willing to contribute to the costs of remediation once it is clear that the catastrophe has occurred. It is much less easy to convince them to contribute if the danger is only a forecast.

2. Slope stabilization vs. Stream erosion

For good reason, Toronto Water uses ravines as "cheap" storm sewers. Yellow Creek and Mud Creek — both tributaries of the Don river — provide cheaper means of routing storm water to Lake Ontario than investing in pipes. But the problem is that the ravines are inadequate for this purpose. Where retaining walls are built, many were designed in the nineteenth century for a city that did not extend much further north than the St Clair escarpment. The water volume from storm

runoff (exacerbated by inadequate control of private owners paving over green space in the watershed) is now orders of magnitude greater than the normal daily stream flow. The result in our ravines is gaping areas of extreme erosion, dangerously undercutting adjacent slopes.

While Toronto Water recognizes this as a key issue, their priority for investment in ravine remediation has understandably been on protecting underground water distribution and sewer pipelines that are in or below ravines. True, this focus is an imperative given the resource constraints they face. But it does not address a key secondary issue — dealing with storm-based erosion of the ravines — for which the City, due to its inaction, may be potentially liable.

This is much more than just a Midtown ravines issue. And work has been undertaken in Mud Creek to ameliorate this. But in Yellow Creek — where the peak storm water flow is far greater — the City has done little to deal with the erosion undercutting ravine slopes other than emergency responses. The ongoing erosion seriously threatens houses above critical segments of the stream (for example, houses on Inglewood Avenue west of Mt Pleasant) as well as eroding ravine paths used by thousands of nearby residents. Safety issues for ravine users have not been given the attention they deserve.

3. Expediting erosion control and parks development in Yellow Creek

We recognize that the issue raised by Councillor Saxe's motion is a City-wide issue. So please forgive us if we plead for a local concern.

Six years ago, after considerable agitation by residents, City Council set up a Working Group of citizens and City staff to expedite the development of a Master Plan for the Vale of Avoca (Yellow Creek) ravine. The ravine is a major recreational asset for the fast-developing Yonge Street corridor between Bloor Street and Davisville. Developments in the area are expected to add close to ten thousand new residents within walking distance of the ravine. The ravine is not only a recreational resource, it is also an environmentally threatened natural area.

Over the last six years, there has been little progress. No Master Plan has been developed, partly because City staff have been waiting for the conclusion of a City-commissioned geomorphic study of threats to Toronto Water infrastructure. We were told five years ago that the geomorphic study would deal with all of the erosion control issues in the ravine. Instead, the study was limited to infrastructure. Threats to underground water pipes are only part of what is really at issue.

We raise this as an issue because it is an example of what is wrong with how the City operates. Too much in the City is operationally a silo. Indeed, as then-Councillor Wong-Tam emphasized when the Working Group was established, the Vale of Avoca Working Group could potentially serve as an example of how the differing objectives of the affected City operating divisions could be integrated and made more effective. Unfortunately, this has not yet happened.

The motion before you is a potentially useful step towards getting beneficiaries of City investments to share in their costs. But it is equally necessary that you ensure that City investments actually provide the benefits for which property owners are asked to contribute a share of costs.

4. Bio-engineering vs mechanical engineering

A major issue in slope stabilization is whether bio-based initiatives — replacing invasive species with native ground cover — can stabilize slopes in lieu of human engineering. Slopes can in many situations be stabilized by engendering good root growth, the kind of natural stabilization resulting from encouraging native species. Where possible, natural stabilization is far more cost-effective

than industrial stabilization. At a minimum, bio-engineering with native species may postpone the need for more radical slope stabilization.

We urge that bio-engineering alternatives be given a higher priority. Planting native species is not a panacea. In Yellow Creek (the area with which we are most familiar) there are some areas (like below Summerhill Gardens) where this should be regarded as a serious alternative. But there are other areas (like Heath Crescent) where there is no alternative to a more expensive investment.

5. Encouraging private slope stabilization initiatives

We also want to emphasize the need for encouraging ravine property owners to make investments in slope stabilization a private initiative. Private property owners have an important role to play and should be incentivized to do so.

In our area, there are many ravine property owners who have made substantial investments in substituting native species for invasives and for other non-intrusive investments in stabilizing ravine slopes. These investments should be encouraged by City and TRCA policies that recognize the potential value of private investment. Too often, the City and TRCA impose road blocks that discourage such private investment.

6. Establishing ravine remediation as a City-wide priority

The City has adopted a Ravine Strategy that sounds good but is ineffectively implemented, largely because of inadequate capital spending. There is little point praising ourselves for our well-meant intentions if we are not collectively willing to pay for implementing them. The City has a large Parks capital reserve — the result of Section 42 and 37 developer contributions. Let's use a substantial part of it to accelerate City investments in ravine remediation.

The ravines in Midtown Toronto — like ravines elsewhere in the City — are a huge potential resource. Ravines are not a self-preserving resource. We need the City's Ravine Strategy to be backed up by greater City investments in ravine remediation, incentives for private stewardship, and community-led stewardship of public ravine lands (such as the ongoing Toronto Nature Stewards initiative).

Starting — just to reiterate our local interest — with Yellow Creek.

We urge you to support Councillor Saxe's motion, expand it to request the relevant operating divisions also to report on how private investment in ravine remediation can be facilitated and encouraged, and increase City investment in erosion control in Toronto's ravines.

Yours truly,

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The Midtown Ravines Group is an incorporated non-profit organization formed by eight Residents Associations in Midtown Toronto. Member associations include the ABC Residents Association, the Bloor East Neighborhood Association, the Deer Park Residents Group, the Governors Bridge Residents Association, the Moore Park Residents Association, the North and South Rosedale Residents Associations, and the Summerhill Residents Association.