

Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan

Date: March 13, 2024
To: Infrastructure and Environment Committee
From: Interim Chief Planner & Executive Director, City Planning
General Manager, Transportation Services
Acting General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation
General Manager, Economic Development and Culture
Wards: Ward 10 Spadina-Fort York

SUMMARY

The Bentway Conservancy ("The Bentway") and the City have collaborated to provide a vision for underutilized public space under and adjacent to the F.G. Gardiner Expressway ("the Gardiner") in the City of Toronto's downtown core. The findings of this work are summarized below and attached to this report as the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan supports the City's Central Waterfront Secondary Plan and the Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan where key policies in the "Shoreline Stitch" are to improve north-south connections to the waterfront, as well as east-west linkages between the Fort York National Historic Site and the Don River Valley.

City Divisions including Transportation Services, Parks, Forestry and Recreation, City Planning, and Economic Development and Culture have been working closely with The Bentway in response to a Member's Motion from 2020 (MM24.18), requesting that the City review how The Bentway's Under Gardiner proposals align with City plans, policies and programs, and report on how implementation could be realized through planning and development applications/approvals, rehabilitation/maintenance programs related to City roads, sidewalks and related infrastructure, and capital programs related to public realm improvements.

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan is a collaboration that was developed between the City's Divisions and The Bentway, and through extensive public consultation. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan provides a public realm vision with recommendations for "baseline" improvements that will provide a cohesive public realm; where residents and visitors could encounter amenities such as pedestrian lighting, public wi-fi, accessible seating, wayfinding and public art. Ideas for site specific improvements have also been included in the plan that respond to various qualities and features of the lands under and adjacent to the Gardiner. City staff, working with The Bentway, will develop an implementation strategy for the plan, including a prioritization framework and funding strategy. Further study is required to confirm the details of the proposed improvements and their feasibility and to integrate further public input. Council

approvals, including any City finding contributions approved through the annual budget process, will be sought as necessary once feasibility is confirmed in order to advance detailed design and implementation. The implementation plan would be structured as a rolling near-term implementation plan, allowing for the flexibility to add and prioritize projects as opportunities arise and available funding is allocated.

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan is consistent with the vision for public realm improvements for Lake Shore Boulevard East Public Realm Plan that was developed along with the Gardiner East Environmental Assessment, and aligned with current City policies, plans, guidelines, and strategies, including: the City of Toronto's Official Plan (Central Waterfront Secondary Plan and Downtown Plan), the Vision Zero Road Safety Plan, Toronto's Public Art Strategy, Visitor Economy Strategic Directions 2023-2028, TransformTO Net Zero Strategy, and Complete Streets Guidelines. The City's downtown core has been growing and moving organically towards Toronto's waterfront. Investment in the Gardiner and surrounding public spaces present an opportunity to further connect the downtown to the waterfront.

The Gardiner Expressway Strategic Rehabilitation Plan that was approved by Council is underway. As part of the "Ontario-Toronto New Deal", the City of Toronto is working with the Provincial government on the upload of the Gardiner. The City has communicated the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan to the Province, and preserving the public realm and programming as part of the upload is a priority for the City.

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan provides both a vision as well as an inventory of strategies, identification of opportunity sites and potential interventions to improve public space underneath and adjacent to the Gardiner that can be implemented over time, as opportunities and funding become available. This joint effort will guide public and private investment in the public realm in the underutilized spaces underneath the Gardiner and be structured to be implemented following rehabilitation work that is required for the Gardiner.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Interim Chief Planner & Executive Director, City Planning, General Manager, Transportation Services, Acting General Manager, Parks Forestry and Recreation and the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture recommend that:

1. City Council endorse, in principle, the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan, Attachment 4 to this report (March 13, 2024).
2. City Council direct the Interim Chief Planner & Executive Director, City Planning, General Manager, Transportation Services, Acting General Manager, Parks Forestry and Recreation and the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, to establish an interdivisional advisory committee, with representation from The Bentway Conservancy and the Province, to provide guidance on the development of an implementation strategy for projects along the Under Gardiner corridor (from Dufferin Street to the Don River), identified in the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan, including identification of near-term priorities, a prioritization framework to support the long-term vision, a guide for implementation partnerships, funding strategy and a resource for

reviewing future development applications along the corridor, which in the case of City financial contributions, will inform future budget submissions for relevant City Divisions.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no current year financial impacts associated with the recommendations in this report. Any future year financial implications to the City resulting from implementation of the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan will be submitted for consideration as part of future budget processes, subject to the City's financial and resources capacity against other critical City-wide impacts.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial implications as identified in the Financial Impact Section.

DECISION HISTORY

In its meeting on December 13, 2023, City Council approved item 2023.CC13.2 which included the terms of the Ontario-Toronto New Deal in principle. The "New Deal" includes the upload of the Gardiner Expressway by the Province.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.CC13.2>

In its meeting on October 24, 2023, the Economic and Community Development Committee received the Visitor Economy Strategic Directions Report 2023-2028 for Information.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2023.EC7.5>

In its meeting on July 19, 2022, City Council adopted 2022.EX34.4 that, among other items, requires City Divisions report back to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee and City Council on opportunities and priorities for future Bentway expansion sites (under and adjacent to the Gardiner Expressway). This work is underway and a separate report to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee will follow at a future date.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EX34.4>

In its meeting of September 30th, 2020, City Council adopted a Member's Motion requesting that staff review The Bentway's Under Gardiner plans, consider alignment with City plans, policies and programs and review options for implementation through planning development applications/approvals, rehabilitation/maintenance programs related to City roads, sidewalks and related infrastructure, and capital programs related to public realm improvement. Additionally, the motion requested an update on how Gardiner maintenance programs and protocols can be further optimized to facilitate the programming of renewed public spaces beneath the Gardiner.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2020.MM24.18>

At its meeting on December 17, 2019, City Council adopted the Public Art Strategy and directed the General Manager, Economic Development and Culture, the Chief Planner

and Executive Director, City Planning, and the General Manager, Transportation Services, in consultation with other impacted City Divisions.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2019.EX11.5>

At its meeting of December 13, 2016 City Council adopted the Strategic Rehabilitation Plan for the Gardiner Expressway. <https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2016.EX20.14>

COMMENTS

Overview

This report presents the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan, a plan for the public realm underneath and adjacent to the Gardiner corridor. The public realm plan's primary study area is from Dufferin Street in the west to Yonge Street in the east, with a secondary study area that extends from Yonge Street to the Don River. The Bentway and the City have collaborated to provide this vision to move forward with initiatives that improve underutilized public spaces in the City's downtown core, connect pedestrians and people cycling to downtown and waterfront amenities, and reimagines destination and programmable spaces that can be utilized for cultural and recreational uses. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan provides an inventory of strategies, opportunity sites, and potential projects that can be implemented over time as opportunities arise.

Following Council endorsement, the City and The Bentway, in collaboration with the Province, will develop an implementation strategy, including a prioritization framework and funding strategy, to guide implementation of the plan over the long term.

F.G. Gardiner Expressway

The Gardiner has been in service for over 60 years and is in need of major rehabilitation. The City has been planning and implementing a Strategic Rehabilitation Plan that was adopted by City Council in December 2016 ([Agenda Item History - 2016.EX20.14 \(toronto.ca\)](#)) that invests in the retention and rehabilitation of the Gardiner. As part of the Gardiner reconstruction in the east, public realm improvements to Lake Shore Boulevard between Jarvis Street and Logan Avenue were developed in the Lake Shore Boulevard East Public Realm Plan, consistent with a condition of Provincial approval related to the Gardiner East EA.

<https://www.waterfrontoronto.ca/sites/default/files/connect/waterfront/08620a1d-cf34-48f5-ae17-2c3b016a26b9/gpr-vision--phasing-and--implementation-plan---feb-2020-final-mar--17.pdf>

With plans that have advanced for the Gardiner rehabilitation, the Lake Shore Boulevard East Public Realm Plan, and the Lower Yonge Precinct EA, the City and The Bentway recognized an opportunity to join the Lake Shore Boulevard East public realm initiatives in the downtown east with The Bentway's successful Phase 1 initiatives under the Gardiner in the downtown west, including features such as landscape improvements and public art, improving connections along and across the Gardiner corridor for pedestrians and people cycling through the downtown core and adjacent to the City's

waterfront. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan supports and complements the Lake Shore Boulevard East Public Realm Plan (part of the approved Gardiner East EA) and sets the direction toward a new future for the underutilized spaces below and adjacent to the elevated expressway in the City's downtown core, where expanded and improved public space is needed.

In December 2023, City Council approved the terms of the Ontario-Toronto New Deal in principle. The Ontario-Toronto New Deal is a plan to, among other initiatives, upload the Gardiner and Don Valley Parkway to the Province, subject to third party due diligence that is targeted to be completed by December 31, 2024. Due diligence to support the upload will include an assessment of all rights-of-ways, airspace, and underground ownership, legal, and corridor management controls.

The Bentway Conservancy

The Bentway Conservancy ("The Bentway") is a not-for-profit organization founded based on a \$25 million donation from the Judy and Wilmot Matthews Foundation, for public realm improvements beneath the elevated Gardiner from Strachan Avenue to Spadina Avenue. The intent was to transform 10 acres of vacant space beneath 55 bents of a western segment of the elevated Gardiner into unique open spaces, or "rooms," featuring public art, landscape improvements, destination space for festivals and markets, as well as a pedestrian and cycling trail. The Bentway's Phase 1 has been constructed and has proven to be a highly successful public space that not only serves the local community but is also a regional attraction. Since the site opened in 2018, The Bentway's Phase 1 site has had more than 940,000 visitors.

2020 Member's Motion

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan responds to the 2020 Member's Motion ([MM24.18](#)), which requested that City Divisions review The Bentway's Under Gardiner Plan proposal, and consider alignments with City plans, policies and programs which could be realized through planning and development applications/approvals, rehabilitation/maintenance programs related to City roads, sidewalks and related infrastructure, and capital programs related to public realm improvement.

Additionally, the motion also requested an update on how Gardiner maintenance programs and protocols can be further optimized to facilitate the programming of renewed public spaces beneath the Gardiner. A multi-divisional staff working group and a senior leadership committee formed to guide a collaborative process with The Bentway, to prepare the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan that is attached to this report as Attachment 4.

Official Plan

The City of Toronto's Official Plan provides a policy framework for priority setting and decision making. Within the Official Plan, the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan and the Downtown Plan provides the policy framework that has informed the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan is consistent and aligned with the City's policies.

The Central Waterfront Secondary Plan

One of the four key principles of the Central Waterfront Secondary Plan is "Removing Barriers/Making Connections". The need to redesign the Gardiner Corridor and Lake Shore Boulevard with opportunities for pedestrian crossings and ample room for cycling and pedestrians was recognized as a priority, along with extending waterfront cultural and heritage corridors north/south and east/west to form a waterfront cultural grid.

The Downtown Plan

The Downtown Plan is a 25-year vision that sets the direction for the city centre as the cultural, civic, retail, and economic heart of Toronto and as a great place to live. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan supports and implements public realm policies that are contained within the Downtown Plan.

The Downtown Plan recognizes that the development of a connected and expanded network of parks and public spaces that encourage urban living are essential for the quality of life as populations in the Downtown grow. The plan acknowledges that where there is limited space, there needs to be innovative ways to provide an improved and expanded public realm to accompany a growing Downtown population, an expanding workforce and an increasing number of visitors.

The Downtown Plan provides objectives for the planning, design, and development of the public realm in Section 7.3 where the goal is to create functional, interesting, and engaging spaces that are connected, safe, comfortable, multi-functional and accessible (Policy 7.3). Specifically, the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan policies to "encourage public life through site-specific placemaking and pedestrian amenities that foster social interaction, including but not limited to seating, landscaping, active uses at grade, way-finding, public art and programming" (Policy 7.3.5) and provides "new and improved pedestrian and cycling connections to and through the public realm in and adjacent to Downtown through streetscape improvements, bridges, trails and bikeways" (Policy 7.3.8).

The Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan identifies the Shoreline Stitch as one of the "Transformative Ideas" and the Downtown Plan contains the supporting policies. The Shoreline Stitch, as shown in Attachment 1, is an area where the Downtown is separated from Lake Ontario by rail lines, the Gardiner and Lake Shore Boulevard.

The key policies in the Shoreline Stitch are to improve north-south connections across transportation corridors, weaving the waterfront back into the fabric of Downtown. It also looks to improve east-west linkages between Fort York and the Don River Valley (Policies 7.28 and 7.29). This is to be achieved through initiatives such as:

- Improving safety, comfort and accessibility for pedestrians crossing and walking along and across Lake Shore Boulevard
- Stitching communities and their parks, streets, and open spaces together across major transportation corridors, increasing accessibility to waterfront parks, improving connections to community assets, and creating new civic spaces and destinations

- Developing a connected public realm under and around the Gardiner Expressway to serve local neighbourhoods, workers, visitors, and the City as a whole.

Partnerships

The Downtown Plan anticipates the need to provide parks and public spaces and the public realm network through alternative methods by developing partnerships, encouraging contributions, working with conservancies, sponsorships, and philanthropic donors (Policies 7.39.3, 7.52). The collaboration between the City, philanthropic donors and The Bentway has been ongoing with this and other initiatives and will continue with the implementation of the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan.

Consultation and Engagement

The development of the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan was informed by extensive consultation. This consultation included online meetings, in-person open houses, pop-ups, online surveys and a public showcase event.

In the summer of 2022, an initial round of five area-specific public consultations were conducted where the project team asked community groups and the public what they liked or disliked about the existing conditions under the highway and for their ideas for how to improve the under Gardiner spaces.

A second round of five area-specific consultation meetings with key community representatives took place in the winter of 2023. The team presented elements of the proposed baseline design elements and potential site-specific projects along the length of the Under Gardiner for discussion.

Following the area-specific consultation meetings, a series of four public open house sessions were held where the public was invited to join an interactive exhibit to confirm what was heard during the initial round of consultation, and to provide feedback on preliminary site-specific opportunities.

The full consultation summary includes:

- 10 district-specific community meetings
- 2,000 website visits with an online survey and interactive map (150+ comments)
- Street Summit consultation pop-up booth
- Open houses (120+ participants)
- Outreach and engagement with Indigenous communities
- Outreach and engagement with unhoused communities and related social service agencies
- A public showcase event with a presentation of the findings and recommendations and a guest panel, attended by community representatives and the public.

Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan is a long-term (multi-decade) vision for the public realm to complement the work taking place as part of the Gardiner Expressway Rehabilitation Plan and contributes towards larger waterfront revitalization efforts. The

Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan outlines improvements that can be implemented by private or public entities that will benefit emerging neighbourhoods, provide provisions for people walking and cycling, and a cohesive identity, repositioning the space underneath the expressway corridor as an inviting part of Toronto's downtown public realm.

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan is categorized into new baseline features that identify this space as a cohesive public realm entity and it also identifies site-specific opportunity sites where the various features of the physical elements of the Gardiner and surrounding areas lend themselves to various creative opportunities.

A New Baseline

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan's "baseline" recommendations support the provision of public amenities along the corridor to meet the needs of visitors and residents and allows for the spaces along the corridor to be used in a multitude of different ways by various user groups and communities. This new "baseline" aims to improve the overall experience of the corridor through four themes: safety and comfort; predictable amenities; wayfinding and identity; and productive ecology.

Proposed "baseline" amenities include:

- Safety and comfort: Connections, pedestrian lighting and intersection improvements
- Predictable Publicly accessible seating, wi-fi and charging stations, cycling amenities, amenities: accessible washrooms and water fountains, plazas and gathering spaces
- Cohesive identity: Standardized bent numbers, reflective intersection treatments, signage cages, active frontages and blue-green medians
- Productive ecology: rainwater management, bioswales, and resilient plantings.

Strategies outlined in the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan outline opportunities to integrate blue-green infrastructure that can manage rainwater, reduce urban heat island effects, and increase urban forests. Blue-green infrastructure along the corridor may include such elements as: the provision of bioswales across the under Gardiner that would allow for the filtration of rainwater prior to entering the city storm systems and waterways and the inclusion of low-maintenance, robust perennials, as well as native plant species across the Under Gardiner medians, and at downspouts to support the ecology in the area.

The new "baseline" amenities provide opportunities to continue City-supported cultural animation. For example, a collaboration between the City-produced Nuit Blanche event and The Bentway has anchored exhibitions at Fort York and the waterfront areas in the past and in the forthcoming 2024 event. The Economic Development and Culture (EDC) Division will work with the Bentway Conservancy to explore future funding opportunities for cultural programming activations linked to the Public Realm Plan.

New public spaces present opportunities to recognize local histories and identities through landscape design, public art, and interpretive features. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan includes recommendations for collaboration and further study with

Indigenous knowledge keepers as well as horticultural specialists who have experience planting in and around infrastructure subject to high-salt, low-light environments.

Site Specific Proposals

The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan outlines five different districts in the primary study area, with distinct approaches to each district that capture the qualities of the Gardiner infrastructure and the surrounding public spaces that could be utilized. The five districts are illustrated in Attachment 2 and are as follows:

- Exhibition Place/West Anchor - from Dufferin Street to Strachan Avenue
- Bentway/Fort York - from Strachan Avenue to Bathurst Street
- Under Gardiner Islands - from Bathurst Street to Spadina Avenue
- Toronto Terrace - from Spadina Avenue to Simcoe Street
- Glass Gardiner - from Simcoe Street to Yonge Street.

A series of opportunity sites and projects have been identified in each district which builds on the key learnings and successes of existing Under Gardiner spaces, with demonstration sites/projects that have been implemented in different locations along the Gardiner corridor. The adoption and implementation of site-specific proposals will require additional studies and would be implemented over multi-year timelines, subject to available funding and coordination with other capital work and investments, for the most part, after completion of Gardiner rehabilitation activities.

Some examples of site-specific proposals include:

- Exhibition Place/West Anchor: At the north end of Exhibition Place there is an existing GO Station, a TTC loop, and the future location of the Ontario Line Exhibition Place Station. There is an opportunity to improve the public realm at this increasingly important multi-modal transportation hub. The transit investment and major events/attractions in this area will result in an increase in pedestrian traffic. A significant number of visitors/tourists will experience this location as their "arrival" in downtown Toronto, and it should be an accessible and welcoming experience. In addition, a proposed connection underneath Strachan Avenue would provide access to Fort York National Historic Site and The Bentway, the waterfront/neighbourhoods to the south, and the downtown core to the east.
- Spadina Avenue and Bathurst Street are potential locations to facilitate east-west connections under the Gardiner corridor. It is proposed that the intersections be considered to explore the potential improvements for crossings at Spadina Avenue and Bathurst Street under the Gardiner, identifying required studies and approvals in the next steps.
- Under Gardiner Islands: There are several median spaces separating opposing lanes of traffic under the Gardiner that currently function as underutilized space adjacent to dense downtown communities such as City Place and Fort York Neighbourhood. The Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan has identified the "Dan Leckie-Lake Shore Triangle" and "Spadina Island" medians, as shown in Attachment 3, as potential opportunities for community, recreational and environmental uses that could bring new and enhanced amenities to the area,

including the potential for off-leash areas, multi-use paths, cultural programming, and blue-green infrastructure. Consideration will need to be given to factors such as safety and access given the adjacency to motor vehicle traffic on Lake Shore Boulevard in determining the appropriate use of these median spaces.

Next Steps

An interdivisional advisory team will be assembled and will work with The Bentway, the Province, and other relevant partners, to prepare an implementation strategy, including identification of near-term priorities, a prioritization framework to support the long-term vision, a guide for implementation partnerships, and a resource for reviewing future development applications along the corridor.

Options for funding the implementation of the Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan include growth-related funding tools, intergovernmental funding, and external partnership opportunities (among other alternative funding sources). Potential funding opportunities may include Federal and Provincial grant programs, including grants targeting active transportation infrastructure.

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: The Downtown Plan Shoreline Stitch

Attachment 2: Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan - Five Districts

Attachment 3: Under Gardiner Islands

Attachment 4: Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan

Attachment 1: The Downtown Plan Shoreline Stitch

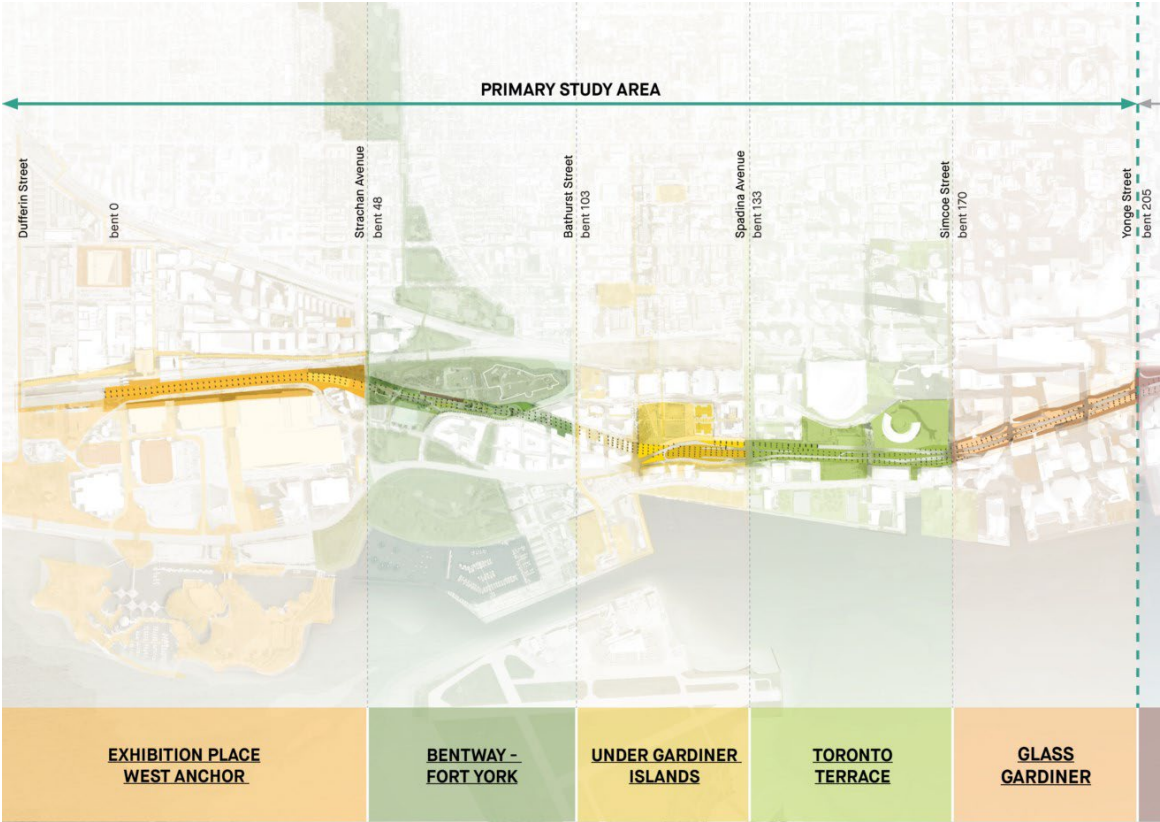


Downtown Plan
MAP 41-10 Shoreline Stitch

- Downtown Plan Boundary
- Central Waterfront Secondary Plan
- Shoreline Stitch

Note: Depiction of areas outside of the Downtown Plan boundary are for illustrative purposes only.

Attachment 2: Under Gardiner Public Realm Plan - Five Districts



Attachment 3: Under Gardiner Islands

