

ConsumersNext: Planning for People and Business at Sheppard and Victoria Park

Visioning Workshop Community Meeting 2 Summary



 We are here

Prepared for the City of Toronto by Swerhun Facilitation

December 14, 2015

MEETING OVERVIEW

On September 24, 2015, the City of Toronto hosted the ConsumersNext Visioning Workshop at the Radisson Hotel Toronto East, 55 Hallcrown Place. The workshop consisted of two identical sessions, one running from 2:00 – 5:00pm and the second running from 6:00 – 9:00pm. Approximately 50 people participated in the workshop, including residents, employees from businesses located in the Study Area, commercial land owners and commercial brokers. Councillors Shelley Carroll and Norm Kelly also attended, provided welcoming remarks and contributed to table discussions.

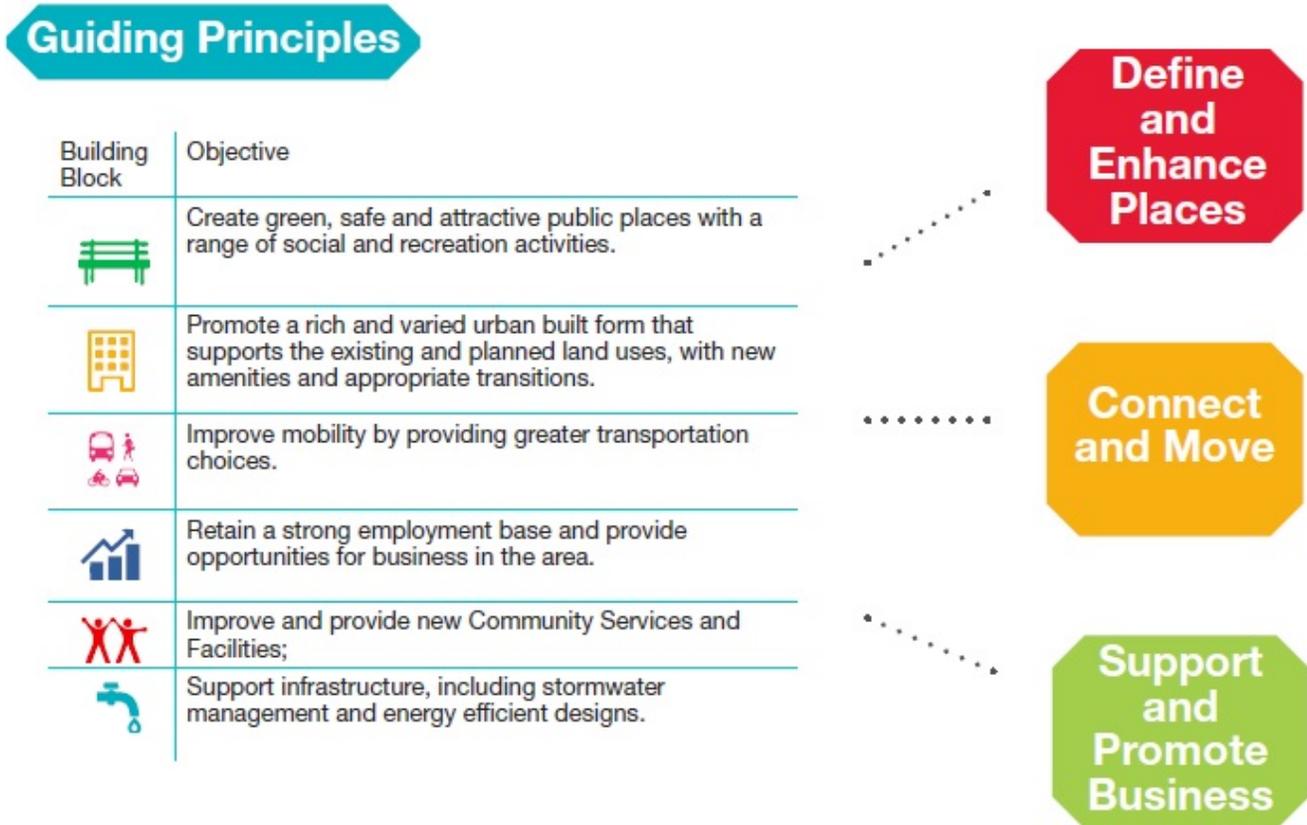
This was the second of four community meetings that will be held over the first three phases of the study. The purpose of the Visioning Workshop was to engage residents and the business community to test and refine the draft Guiding Principles and create visions and design alternatives to improve and enhance the ConsumersNext Study Area.



Study Process Graphic

The visioning sessions started with an overview presentation on the findings to date related to each of the six building blocks (Public Places, Transportation Choices, Opportunities for Business Growth, Community Services and Facilities, Built Form, and Water Infrastructure), the draft Guiding Principles, and precedents from other Business Parks / Office Nodes. Participants were then led through two facilitated design exercises where they explored different ideas related to Public Places, Transportation Choices and Built Form (Exercise 1), and Community Services, Business Park Opportunities and Amenities (Exercise 2). In exploring ideas, participants were asked to consider existing conditions, opportunities, precedents related to each building block and draft Guiding Principles.

The three Guiding Principles, outlined below, take into consideration the objectives for each of the six building blocks and their relationship to each other.



Guiding Principles Graphic

Participants did not express any objections to the draft Guiding Principles, which will be used to guide the conception, analysis and refinement of alternative development scenarios in future phases of the ConsumersNext study.

This summary was written by Swerhun Facilitation, an independent facilitation firm that is part of the R.E. Millward & Associates-led consultant team. This report is not intended to provide a verbatim transcript of the meeting but instead provides a high level summary of participant feedback.

If you have any questions about this summary, please contact Steve Forrester, Senior Planner, Community Planning, City of Toronto, by email (sforrest@toronto.ca) or by phone (416-395-7126).

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE REPORT BACK

A summary of the results of the design exercises were reported back to the full room at the conclusion of each visioning session. The key messages from the afternoon and evening session reporting summaries follow below.

1 Improve connections to and through the ConsumersNext Study Area to make it more attractive to employees and residents and more than just a place to drive through.

- Participants felt that higher-order transit, particularly connections to the subway station at Fairview Mall, is critical for maintaining and attracting employment uses.
- They also felt that initiatives could be undertaken to improve pedestrian and cyclist safety through new and improved connections over Highway 404, a network of active transportation trails and pathways and improvements to key intersections.

2 Create a pedestrian and cycling greenway along the west and south ends of the Study Area.

- Participants felt that this greenway would create a safer space for pedestrians and cyclists to access the Study Area.
- They also felt that it could serve as a public space, with a densely planted buffer between the greenway and Highways 404 and 401.

3 There are many opportunities to enhance the existing public realm and add new public spaces.

- Some participants talked about creating a public square within the centre of the Study Area. Others talked about locating this public space closer to Sheppard Avenue East but not fronting the street. Still others talked about creating a series of smaller parks throughout the Study Area.
- There was interest in animating the park/square(s) by co-locating a community centre and/or ensuring the park/square could accommodate various activities and programming, such as performances and festivals.

4 Clustering new uses and amenities could help enliven the Study Area, making it a '16 hour a day' place.

- Participants talked about creating a handful of focal points within the Study Area and clustering shops, restaurants and community facilities at these locations. The Shops at Don Mills was brought up as an example of a cluster of these types of uses.
- They also talked about built form, emphasizing retail and amenities on ground floors, providing space for large-scale retail (e.g. grocery stores), pushing back towers from adjacent neighbourhoods and providing animated frontages on both the front and rear of buildings along Sheppard and Victoria Park.

5 There is an opportunity to further enliven the Study Area by drawing residents from the existing neighbourhoods to the north and east into the Business Park.

- Participants talked about how Sheppard Avenue East and Victoria Park Avenue feel like a dividing line as there currently is not a lot to attract residents into the Business Park.
- They emphasized that new amenities, public spaces and community facilities should serve to draw residents into the Business Park (e.g. a new grocery store would be welcomed) and that new development should be sensitive to and integrated with the established communities to the north and east.

DETAILED SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK – AFTERNOON SESSION

The detailed summary of feedback below is based on the views that participants in the afternoon session shared through the two facilitated design exercises. The feedback has been organized by building block.

Public Places

Many participants would like to see a large park/open space centrally located within the Business Park. They felt that this type of large central park could function as a well-connected node within the Business Park, featuring retail, restaurants and community services and facilities to help animate the space. They also felt that this central park/amenity area would help draw people into the Business Park from the surrounding areas.

Several participants suggested a new linear park/open space running along the western boundary (Highway 404) and southern boundary (Highway 401) of the Study Area. They thought that this linear park could feature a pedestrian/bike path, trees and other vegetation to buffer the Business Park from the highways, and act as a skating trail in the winter. They noted that the Beaver Creek Business Park in Richmond Hill has a similar feature.



Design Exercise Map Showing Linear Park

There were a number of other suggestions on park types and locations, including:

- A large park along Sheppard to help attract residents from communities to the north and new buildings along the street.
- A park to accompany any new development at the northwest corner of Sheppard and Victoria Park.
- A park to the southwest of Consumers Road and Victoria Park Avenue, close to the Armenian Community Centre.

It was suggested that some of the existing open spaces in the Business Park could be better used. Some felt that the open space in front of 280-422 Consumers Road (a low-rise commercial/industrial strip mall arranged in a U-shape with a parking lot and grassed area within the area enclosed by the 'U') could be better used if it had places for people to sit and there were restaurants and coffee shops nearby. Others suggested that employees and residents should be allowed to use the open space beside the school on Yorkland Boulevard outside of school hours. They also talked about how a new park/open space could be located adjacent to this existing open space to make it larger and more useable. Some participants talked about the green space in front of the Atria complex and how it is already well used by employees in the summer.

Participants felt that parks and open spaces should be designed to accommodate a wide range of activities, including recreation (e.g. basketball, outdoor exercise equipment, skating rink, and jungle gyms), socializing, eating and entertainment. Some of these activities (e.g. company picnics, community festivals) are already taking place but have to be held in parking lots due to the lack of parks/open space.

Several participants felt that more attractive streetscapes would help encourage pedestrian activity in the Study Area. They talked about including more trees and other vegetation along streets (some felt that existing building setbacks could be preserved to provide more room for trees), better looking light standards, wider boulevard/sidewalks, awnings and other features to protect pedestrians from wind and weather, and more benches. They also talked about creating pedestrian-only streets/connections.

Transportation Choices

Participants suggested that new streets/mid-block connections could be added to the Study Area to break up larger parcels of land and provide a more fine grain grid pattern of streets and roads. They felt that this would help encourage pedestrian traffic – particularly if the new streets were lined with ground floor retail – and also help alleviate congestion by providing more routes for people to get in and out of the Study Area.

Pedestrians

Many participants felt that pedestrian safety in the Study Area could be improved by improving crossings (e.g. Sheppard and Consumers, Sheppard and Victoria Park, Sheppard and Brian) and reducing speed limits on internal roads to 30-40km/h. They said that right now it can feel dangerous to walk in certain parts of the Study Area because of the number and speed of cars. Some said that they prefer to drive because walking does not feel safe.



Many participants would like to see improved pedestrian connections between the Study Area and Don Mills Station and Fairview Mall. They identified the Sheppard Avenue East bridge over Highway 404 in particular as an area in need of improvement, suggesting changes to enhance pedestrian visibility near the on/off ramps and widening/buffering/covering the sidewalk across the bridge.

Cycling

Some participants felt that bike lanes should not be added to Consumers Road because it is too busy and they would be unsafe.

Transit

Several participants said they would like to see the Study Area better connected to higher order transit. Some felt that the large number of jobs and growth anticipated in the Study Area warranted an extension of the subway from Don Mills Road. Others were concerned that surface higher order transit may reduce the number of vehicular access points into the business area.

Private Vehicles

Many participants would like to see improvements made to the Study Area's road network to help alleviate congestion on arterials and traffic infiltration in adjacent neighbourhoods.

Their suggestions included:

- Adding or improving on/off ramps to Highways 401 and 404.
- Improving access from within the Business Park to arterial roads through road widenings and/or new roads.
- Changing the location of traffic lights within the Study Area (e.g. reduce the number of signals on Sheppard, add a signal at Hallcrown and Consumers, revise signal timing at Consumers and Victoria Park).
- Consider adding High Occupancy Vehicle lanes but do not add road tolls.

One participant suggested that employers should consider adopting staggered work hours for some employees in order to relieve traffic congestion during peak times.

There was a range of views on the amount of parking spaces needed in the Study Area.

Some felt that parking is at a premium, with many landowners renting/leasing out space to other nearby employers to satisfy demand for parking. Others suggested that surface parking lots could be replaced with parking structures so that space can be used more efficiently. A number of participants felt that it was important for retail business to have ample parking available for customers.

Several participants who represent property owners and large employers stated that most of their tenants/employees drive to work and use their cars when they go out for lunch in and around the Study Area. They felt that this could change if there were a greater number of transportation choices and more amenities within walking distance.

Opportunities for Business Growth

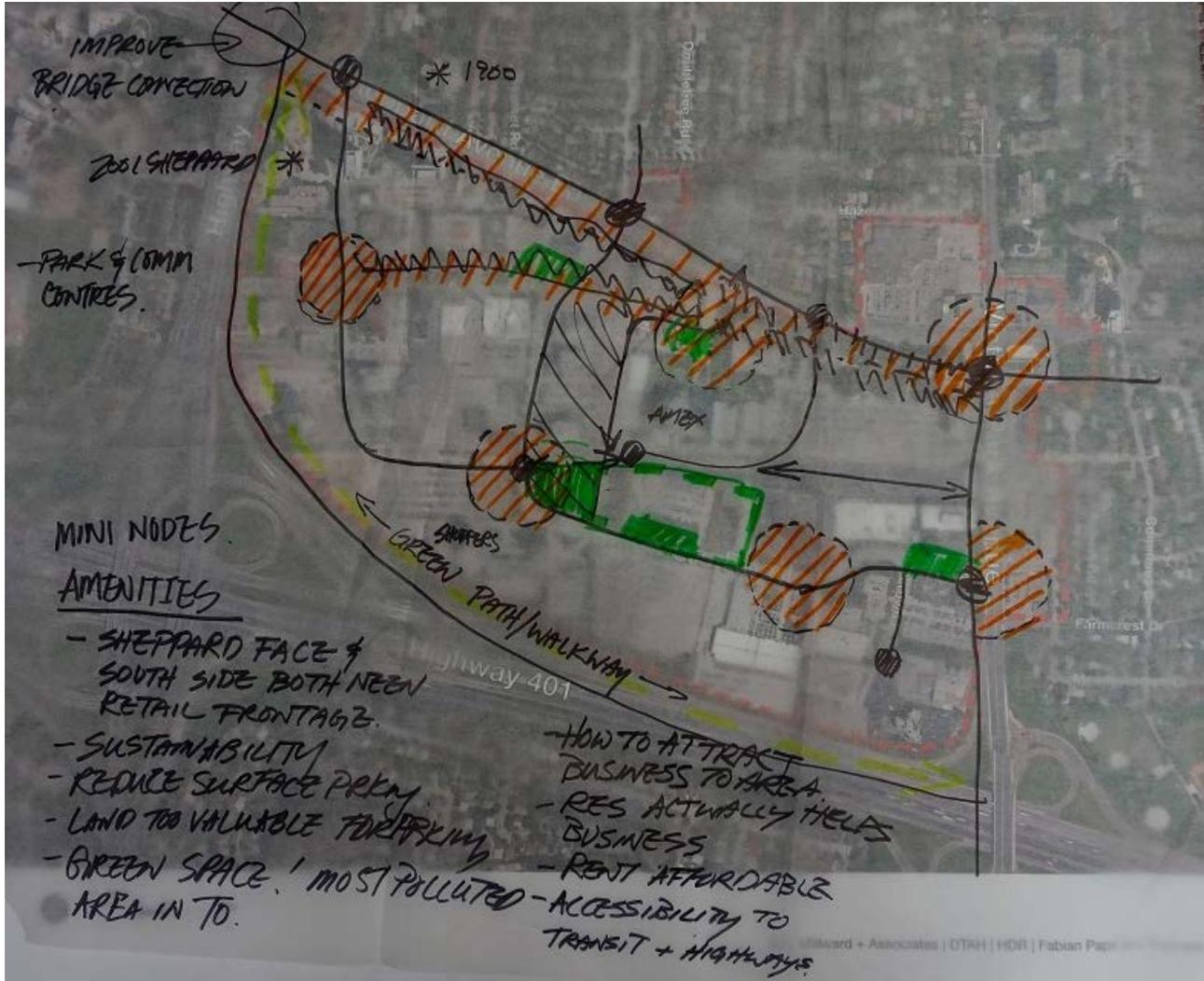
Several participants talked about the things that made them want to locate their business/purchase a property in the Business Park. They felt that the Business Park is attractive because of its reasonable rents, the amount of nearby amenities compared to more suburban business parks, the proximity to a subway line and good access to two highways.

A number of participants suggested that improvements to the transportation network would make the area more attractive for business growth. Participants talked about the importance of higher order transit along Sheppard, particularly for office growth. They also suggested making it easier for people to access the two highways.

Participants suggested that clustering amenities at various focal points within the Business Park would help make it a more attractive area. They felt that each cluster could feature public spaces, parks, shops, restaurants, community services and facilities and institutional uses, all within walking distance of one another and nearby employment uses, to overcome the sense that walking distances across the Study Area are too far.

Participants felt that business growth could be spurred by transforming the Business Park into more of a destination. Local residents felt that there is currently not much to draw them into the Business Park and employees said that there is not much to draw them to the area outside of working hours. Suggestions on how to make the Business Park more of a destination included:

- Add uses that support business activities like additional hotels at a range of price points and meeting spaces/convention facilities.
- Develop a brand for the area (e.g. business parks in Markham are associated with high-tech industries).
- Improve wayfinding to and within the Business Park by adding gateway features at major intersections and making street signs larger and more visible.



Design Exercise Map Showing Amenity Clusters

Built Form

There was a range of views on appropriate building heights. Some participants were fine with taller buildings along Sheppard and Victoria Park while others would prefer to see mid-rise buildings (with opinions on the most appropriate mid-rise height ranging from 6 to 12 storeys). A few participants cited buildings at Sheppard and Bayview as good examples. Those who were not in favour of tall buildings expressed concern that they could exacerbate traffic congestion in the Study Area and cause shadowing impacts on adjacent properties.

Some participants expressed support for taller buildings under certain conditions, including that they:

- Appropriately transition to existing adjacent low-rise residential neighbourhoods.

- Include family-sized units (e.g. 5-10% of units 3 bedroom or larger).
- Provide ground floor retail with a range of commercial unit sizes (e.g. some large scale for grocery stores and others smaller scale).
- Provide a pleasant and safe pedestrian environment and do not contribute to traffic congestion.
- Are located only in certain parts of the Study Area (with a range of views on these locations) – e.g. close to Highway 401, at Victoria Park and Sheppard, along the west side of Victoria Park.

Many participants would like to see more shops, grocery stores, restaurants and cafes within the Study Area. They would like these uses to be located so that they are within reasonable walking distance of their work or home. There are some existing retail and restaurants along the east side of Victoria Park that people would like to remain. There are some commercial uses that participants do not want to see in the Study Area, including night clubs or other entertainment district-type uses.

Participants talked about opportunities for locating retail and restaurants within the Business Park rather than solely along Sheppard and Victoria Park. Some talked about transforming Consumers Road into a “higher order” street or spine like Yonge Street is in North York Centre. Others talked about encouraging clusters of these uses like the Shops at Don Mills (it was noted that there are plans for a six storey parking structure within the Business Park with retail and a restaurant at the ground floor).

Community Services and Facilities

Participants identified a number of existing community services and facilities in the Study Area that they felt were important, including:

- The Armenian Community Centre (which is 20,000 sq. ft., features a day school, church and recreation programs, and serves 35,000 people).
- A number of private gyms, recreation facilities and child care centres that are in some of the office buildings in the Study Area.
- The library at Fairview Mall.

Participants identified a number of new community services and facilities that they would like to see in the Study Area, including:

- Community centres/recreation centres that could include a swimming pool, fitness centre, playing fields, squash courts, a skate park/bmx park (although some do not like the skate park located north of the Study Area). Some suggested that a community centre could be located in the base of a new mixed-use building.
- Childcare facilities.
- Healthcare facilities including walk-in clinics, pharmacies, adult living centres.
- Educational uses including schools to accommodate additional residential units, post-secondary institutions, and a new/expanded library.
- Cultural facilities including a local theatre and galleries.
- A cluster of restaurants and other establishments to keep people in the area after work (e.g. there is a restaurant park in an employment area at Highways 404 and 7 that has become a destination).
- An educational institution (e.g. college, trade school, satellite campus, training facility) located within the Business Park to vary types of uses and peak activity times.

Some participants were concerned that the area was becoming less attractive to businesses due to the growth in general employment uses (e.g. car dealerships) and non-employment uses (e.g. places of worship and schools) in the Business Park.

Water Infrastructure

One participant expressed concern about basement flooding in neighbourhoods adjacent to the Study Area.

Other Feedback

There was a range of views amongst some participants on how development charges should be used, including:

- Development charges should be used to provide new parks and developers should not be allowed to provide cash-in-lieu payments in place of building parks.
- Development charges should be funneled into public transit.
- New office development could be encouraged by providing additional incentives.

Some participants noted that the Study Area has amongst the poorest air quality in Toronto due to the intersection of the two major highways. It was suggested that because of this, there is an opportunity for the area to become greener (e.g. green roofs, co-generation facilities and efforts to attract green industries).

DETAILED SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK – EVENING SESSION

The detailed summary of feedback below is based on the views that participants in the evening session shared through the two facilitated design exercises. The feedback has been organized by building block.

Public Places

Many participants liked the idea of a public square located in the middle of the Study Area. Participants said they would like to have a public gathering space in the Business Park that could be used by people who live in the area, will live in the area and who work in the area. Mel Lastman Square, the public spaces at the Shops at Don Mills, Kensington Market and the Distillery District were provided as examples that could be used for inspiration. One participant said that a series of small parks placed in different locations throughout the Study Area would serve both local residents and employees. Other participants felt that rooftop parks should be introduced where possible.

Participants shared a number of ideas on the activities that could take place in parks and open spaces, including parks that could be used to host community events, festivals and the performing arts. Other participants would like to see space for winter activities such as skating.

Consider using larger surface parking lots in the evenings for community events. The community/public uses participants suggested included: festivals; drive-in movies; food trucks; and screening of major events such as the Pan Am Games. Participants also suggested breaking up large parking lots with landscaping.

Parks and open spaces need to be designed in a way that keeps all users safe, especially children. Participants said that there is an opportunity to make parks safer by using trees, benches and fences to create physical and visual barriers between parks and streets.

Participants had several suggestions on how the public realm could be improved, including adding ground floor retail and other active uses along streets within the Business Park and by increasing the amount of street furniture (benches, planters, trees) in the area.

Transportation Choices

Pedestrians

There is a need to create more pedestrian connections between existing and newly constructed buildings. Participants said that pedestrian paths and sidewalks between buildings could be improved and increased to make it easier for people to walk within the Business Park. In particular, a potential pedestrian trail/linear park along Yorkland/Consumers Road was suggested.

Many participants stressed the importance of pedestrian safety and provided suggestions on how it could be improved, including: installing more on-demand pedestrian crossings (particularly at larger intersections like Consumers Road and Victoria Park Avenue and on some smaller but busy streets like Brian Drive), widening sidewalks, and reducing vehicle speed limits to 30 km/h to improve safety for pedestrians. Some participants suggested installing a pedestrian underpass at Victoria Park Avenue and Sheppard Avenue East.

Increase the number of streets and pedestrian-priority connections in the Study Area to increase the options pedestrians have for moving to and through the area. In addition to new streets/pedestrian connections, it was suggested that the number of public walkways through buildings could be increased to make it easier for pedestrians to get around in the winter.

Improve pedestrian connections across Highway 404 to Parkway Forest.

Cycling

Some participants felt that transportation choices could be improved by installing cycling infrastructure and bike routes throughout the Study Area. One participant suggested putting a bike route along Sheppard Avenue East. Another participant said that Huntingwood Drive is a good example of the type of street that can accommodate bike lanes or other cycling infrastructure.

Some participants said that bike lanes or paths should be separated from other vehicles within the Study Area to ensure the safety of all users. Participants said this would be particularly important on major roads such as Sheppard Avenue East.

Transit

Participants suggested making the area more transit accessible by increasing bus service in the area as well as the number of stops on the different routes. One participant said they would like the TTC bus on Brian Drive to connect to Van Horne Avenue and Don Mills subway station.

Opportunities for Business Growth

Participants felt that more could be done to promote area businesses. They suggested that the Economic Development and Culture Division could work to promote the area across the city and that wayfinding could be improved throughout the Study Area to help people locate and discover the different businesses and services located within the Business Park. Some form of co-operative structure to coordinate local transit was also suggested.

There is a need to protect employment land within the Study Area. One participant felt that mixed use development may become a threat to employment land and therefore opportunities for business growth.

It was suggested that vehicular access to the Study Area would aid in securing opportunities for business growth. Participants suggested enhancing access between the 400-series highways and the Study Area and ensuring that retail plazas have adequate parking (the Brian Village Plaza was cited specifically).

Ensure commercial uses reflect income levels and consumer preferences of the residents living in the Study Area and the surrounding neighbourhoods. One participant noted that strip commercial/industrial malls often act as 'incubator' spaces for small businesses/establishments and it is important to maintain this function.

Participants felt that further consultation should be done with large employers to provide further insight into employer and employee desires. It was suggested that a survey is one tool that could be used to obtain this data.

Built Form

Most participants were not in favour of tall buildings along Victoria Park and Sheppard and preferred mid-rise buildings. These participants expressed concerns that tall buildings would lead to increased traffic congestion and shadowing on adjacent properties. Others said that they like the idea of having buildings with a six storey base along Sheppard Avenue East, or that they preferred to see mid-rise buildings east of Victoria Park Avenue. Some felt that the northwest corner of Victoria Park/Sheppard may be able to accommodate a taller building, closer to the intersection.

Participants had a handful of suggestions related to building design, including that buildings along Sheppard with ground floor commercial uses should have both a front and back door so that people could walk in off the street or from a parking lot at the back. Some felt that weather protection for pedestrians (e.g. arcades) are also an important design element. There was also a suggestion to put the most architecturally interesting buildings along Sheppard Avenue East

Several participants felt there should be a greater amount of retail and services located in the Study Area on the ground floor of new and existing buildings, including more restaurants, high end grocery stores and medical services.

Community Services and Facilities

Several participants would like to see a greater amount of community services and facilities in the area, including a library, new school and a new community centre to act as an access point

for different services offered in the area. Other complimentary uses identified included a medical office, dental office, fire hall, and fitness and health centre.

There is a need to improve pedestrian access to community services and facilities in the area, especially child care services and the library. Participants noted that is particularly difficult for parents to access child care facilities with strollers in the winter due to snow.

NEXT STEPS

The ideas shared by participants at the Visioning Workshop will be used alongside the draft Guiding Principles, research analysis and data collected in Phase 1 to develop a series of design alternatives. These alternatives will explore things like new street networks, land use and building heights, park and open space locations, public realm improvements and development potential. Feedback will be sought on these alternatives at the next community meeting, tentatively scheduled for late February 2016.