

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

Community Meeting 3 Summary



People participating in table discussions

Prepared for the City of Toronto by Swerhun Facilitation

June 8, 2016

MEETING OVERVIEW

On April 25, 2016, the City of Toronto hosted the ConsumersNext Community Meeting 3 from 5:00 – 9:00pm at the Radisson Hotel Toronto East, 55 Hallcrown Place. Approximately 100 people participated in the workshop, including residents, employees from businesses located in the Study Area, commercial land owners and commercial brokers. Councillor Shelley Carroll and members of Councillor Norm Kelly's office were also in attendance.

This was the third of four community meetings that will be held over the first three phases of the study. The purpose of Community Meeting 3 was to present an emerging urban structure for the Study Area and options for redevelopment. The results of this meeting will be used to help inform the selection of a preferred alternative, to be refined, tested and finalized in Phase 3 of the Study.



Study Process Graphic

The meeting started with an open house during which participants could view display panels and engage in one-on-one discussions with members of the study team. Following the open house, the meeting format shifted to a series of presentations and table discussions, each with a different focus, including: the overall urban structure, the mixed use areas, and the employment areas. Through these presentations and discussions, participants were asked to weigh in on different ideas and alternatives related to built form, streets and blocks, public realm, parks and open spaces, and transportation. Each table then reported back highlights from their discussions to the full room. Detailed discussion results were recorded by a facilitator at each table. This summary draws on both the report back and detailed table notes.

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 all three table discussions were reported back to the full room in the final 20 minutes of the meeting. The key messages from the report back follow below.

Urban Structure

- As at past ConsumersNext meetings, many participants expressed concern about existing congestion and traffic infiltration and the potential that these would worsen with intensification in the mixed use areas.
- To help alleviate congestion, participants suggested improving access from the business park to the highways, implementing higher order transit, and encouraging people to switch to non-automobile modes of travel.
- There was interest in better understanding how traffic impacts will be tested. It was suggested that the trade-offs between different modes (e.g. capacity vs. road space allocation) should be included as a factor in the transportation analysis.
- Many participants liked the additional streets and connections provided for in the proposed streets and block plan. They felt that this would make the business park more walkable, and make it easier to enter and exit the park. Some expressed concern about the proposed new street that would connect Hallcrown Place to Victoria Park.
- Participants also felt that walkability could be improved by keeping existing trees, adding new trees, encouraging ground floor uses and including pedestrian-only streets.
- Participants suggested that parking would continue to be important in the study area and that the amount and location of parking should match the scale and use of proposed redevelopment (e.g. retail benefits from proximate parking)
- There was a range of views on the size and location of parks, with some preferring fewer, larger parks (with a “central” park located near the “main street”) and others preferring a greater number of smaller parks.
- Participants noted that some community facilities and services were already at or above capacity (e.g. Brian Public School). It was suggested that the study explore putting community uses in the bases of mixed use buildings.

Mixed Use Areas

- As at past ConsumersNext meetings, participants expressed a range of preferences for the height of buildings in the mixed use areas. Some felt that the Sheppard and Victoria Park corridors should be mid-rise in scale and that tall buildings should only be permitted within the employment areas. Others felt that tall buildings were acceptable as long as there were appropriate transitions to adjacent neighbourhoods and open spaces.
- Several participants said they liked the idea of the nodes and the “aperture” pedestrian connection from the Sheppard/Victoria Park intersection in particular (although some were concerned that building heights proposed in some alternatives would cause shadowing on the aperture and adjacent proposed park). Others said they would like further information on the nodes, including how they were selected (e.g. based on transportation, overall density or other factors).

- Participants also generally liked the main street idea, although some suggested that mixed uses, including residential, be considered for this district to help spur investment.

Employment Areas

- Participants generally liked the kit of parts and were interested in understanding how they could be implemented. Some suggested that incentives were needed to spur investment and others felt that the kit of parts and study should build in flexibility (although some were concerned that flexibility could lead to undesirable uses).
- Concern was expressed about the limited existing access points to the business park, with some feeling that development in the mixed use areas would further limit access through increased congestion. It was suggested that transportation solutions should be designed with the needs of the business park in mind.

DETAILED SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

The detailed summary of feedback below is based on the views of participants shared through three table discussions as recorded by table facilitators. These three discussions focused on (1) urban structure, (2) mixed use areas, and (3) employment areas.

Urban Structure

The urban structure discussion was oriented around four sub-topics, including (1) districts and nodes, (2) streets and blocks strategy, (3) parks and open space strategy, and (4) mobility strategy.

Districts and Nodes

Districts

- Several participants agreed with the division of the study area into three districts.
- Several participants suggested that the mixed use area could be extended into the employment areas as long as the level of employment was maintained in new development. They felt that this would help spark investment in the employment areas.
- Others felt that the mixed use area could be problematic for the employment areas as the former would create additional traffic.

Nodes

- Several participants liked the idea of the nodes and felt that they were at logical locations. There was interest in more detailed information on what exactly the nodes would consist of and how they would be implemented.
- Some felt that there should only be one node, suggesting that the Sheppard / Consumers Node may take away from the Sheppard / Victoria Park Node and therefore should be removed.
- Others felt that additional nodes could be added, including Sheppard / Yorkland and Victoria Park / Consumers.

Main Street

- Several participants liked the idea of the main street, feeling that it would create a focal point and draw people from the residential areas outside of the business park.
- Some suggested that the main street should be extended for the entire length of Consumers Road, from Sheppard Avenue East to Victoria Park Avenue.
- It was suggested that the main street should be designed to be a destination – like the Shops at Don Mills. Others suggested that the main street would need residential uses too to create activity 18 hours a day.

Streets and Blocks Strategy

- Several participants liked the proposed streets and blocks strategy, feeling that it will help people get into and move around the business park.

- Participants expressed a number of concerns about the proposed streets and blocks strategy, including:
 - That new streets would require expropriation
 - Responsibility for funding new streets
 - New streets could lead to traffic infiltration into neighbourhoods
 - There needs to be even more access to Sheppard
 - That the new road between Hallcrown Place and Victoria Park could cause traffic and safety issues at the school and community centre
 - That the new street in the northwest quadrant of the Sheppard and Victoria Park Node would require the demolition of the grocery store.
- Participants had a number of suggested refinements to the proposed streets and blocks strategy, including:
 - Smaller parcels through the Highway Edge District
 - A new road between Yorkland Boulevard and Yorkland Road
 - Additional streets and connections throughout the study area
 - Additional streets and connections outside the study area

Parks and Open Space Strategy

Parks and Plazas

- Several participants liked the proposed park and plaza locations, feeling that they would serve the needs of both businesses and residents. Some felt that additional parkland would be needed if higher densities are allowed.
- There was a range of views on the appropriate size of future parks and plazas. Some preferred one larger, more central park / plaza. Others preferred many smaller, rather than fewer larger parks and plazas.
- A few participants had specific suggestions related to parks and plazas, including:
 - New parks should be framed by buildings with active ground floor uses (e.g. cafes) and located to the south of buildings to minimize shadowing
 - The proposed park at Hallcrown Place should be widened
 - Hickory Nut Parkette should be expanded
 - The plaza at Sheppard and Victoria Park should be moved because the streets are too busy for people to enjoy the public space

Greening of Streets and Public Realm Opportunities

- Several participants liked the idea of improved streetscapes, including the wider sidewalks, connections to existing parks and open space areas (e.g. Wishing Well Park), and setbacks that would preserve existing trees and allow for the planting of new trees.
- Some expressed concern about the potential noise impacts of the adjacent highways on the proposed greenway.
- It was suggested that storm water ponds could be built as an open space / public realm feature, as was done at Downsview Park.

Mobility Strategy

Automobile Mobility

- Several participants expressed concern about the level of traffic where Sheppard Avenue East and Victoria Park Avenue interchange with Highway 404 and 401 respectively. They suggested adjusting existing ramps / adding new ramps, adding new bridges over the highways, and adding tunnels under the highways.
- Many participants expressed concerns with the proposed lane reductions on Sheppard Avenue East where it crosses over Highway 404. They felt that this would increase congestion that would not be relieved by other modes.
- Participants were generally supportive of the proposed addition of signalized intersections. They suggested that it will be important to synchronize these signals to improve traffic flow. It was further suggested that a signalized intersection be added at Consumers Road and Hallcrown Place.
- A few participants felt that there was a need for more parking. Others felt that parking was necessary only at important destinations (e.g. community centres)

Transit Mobility

- Several participants talked about the need for better transit in the area, with some expressing support for High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes on Victoria Park Avenue, extending the 144 bus route north, adding in a community bus, and creating better linkages with GO busses.
- Others talked about Light Rail Transit (LRT) and expressed concern that it would create additional congestion, restrict turning movements, and reduce space for cycle lanes and sidewalks.
- Still others felt that the subway should be extended eastward from Don Mills Station to connect to the business park and beyond.

Pedestrian and Cycling Mobility

- Several participants felt that it is important to increase walkability in the study area (e.g. making sure all streets have sidewalks on both sides) and liked the proposed improvements to pedestrian mobility, including the widened sidewalks where Sheppard Avenue East crosses over Highway 404.
- Participants also suggested that the pedestrian network should take into account the potentially differing needs of workers, residents, and users of community services. Furthermore, the suggested that pedestrian access at the community nodes should be strengthened.
- Some were concerned about the proposed cycling lane on Sheppard Avenue East where it crosses over Highway 404, feeling that it might impact traffic, that it would not be a comfortable place to cycle, and that there may be safety issues at the interchange ramps. That being said, they did feel that cycle lanes would generally create safer conditions for cyclists.

- Others expressed concern about cycle lanes overall, feeling that they add to congestion and that there are not enough cyclists in the area to support adding cycle lanes.

EcoMobility

- Several participants liked the idea of EcoMobility hubs, including car share and bike share services. They also suggested that the City could work with Smart Commute to help realize some of the components of the EcoMobility hubs.

Mixed Use Areas

The urban structure discussion was oriented around three sub-topics, including (1) Sheppard Avenue East, (2) Victoria Park Avenue, and (3) Sheppard and Victoria Park Node.

Sheppard Avenue East

Building Height

- Several participants expressed support for the proposed built form along Sheppard Avenue East, stating that they liked that the proposed heights are lower than what is currently approved / recently built along the corridor.
- Some suggested that taller buildings could be considered if they would provide community uses (e.g. schools) in their base.
- Others felt that the proposed built form was too tall and would cause shadowing impacts on the adjacent residential neighbourhoods. These participants felt that nothing higher than midrise should be allowed.

Public Realm

- Some felt that walkability along Sheppard Avenue East would be improved with the proposed built form. Others felt that Sheppard was too busy a street for people to want to walk along it, regardless of the built form.
- Other public realm-related suggestions included adding additional open space along Sheppard Avenue East, designing places for people to sit outside of ground floor retail, and limiting the use of colonnades.

Specific Retail and Community Uses

- Participants expressed some concern about the capacity of existing community facilities and felt that additional facilities could be added along Sheppard Avenue East in the bases of new developments.
- A few participants talked about the specific types of retail spaces they would like to see, including larger, grocery store-sized units and smaller units that could accommodate existing small businesses.

Parking

- A few participants discussed parking and expressed a preference for surface parking over underground parking for retail uses. They also felt that parking should be free.

Victoria Park Avenue

Height

- Many participants expressed a preference for built form Alternative 1. They liked its midrise heights and felt that taller buildings were more appropriate along Sheppard and at the Sheppard / Victoria Park Node.
- A few participants felt that tall buildings along Victoria Park Avenue were acceptable as long as they did not cause shadowing issues on adjacent residential neighbourhoods. They said that if the second alternative was pursued, additional community services would likely be needed.
- There was a range of views on the proposed built form on the east side of Victoria Park Avenue (which remained constant in both alternatives). Some liked the midrise height while others felt that it would have impacts on the residential neighbourhood to the east. One participant suggested exploring ways to make the east side's built form act as an invitation to Wishing Well Park.

Density and Traffic Impacts

- Several participants were concerned that additional density would create larger traffic impacts. Some felt that the second alternative would create greater traffic impacts than the first. Others suggested lowering the density on the west side of Victoria Park in both alternatives to minimize impacts on adjacent businesses and community uses.

Public Realm

- Participants suggested that there should be active uses (e.g. retail, restaurants) all along Victoria Park Avenue and that setbacks could be used for patio space.
- A few participants also felt that there was an important view corridor from Victoria Park Avenue to the dome of the St. Mary Armenian Apostolic Church that would be diminished by the second built form alternative.

Specific Retail Uses

- Participants suggested a number of specific retail uses that they would like to see maintained / accommodated in new development, including: Johnny's Hamburgers, a grocery store, other restaurants, a farmers market.

Sheppard and Victoria Park Node

Aperture

- Many participants liked the idea of the "aperture" pedestrian connection at the southwest corner of Sheppard Avenue East and Victoria Park Avenue. They felt that this feature would help draw people into the business park and the interior park / plaza. It was suggested that the aperture be lined with retail uses to help further draw people in, although some cautioned that having to include active uses on three frontages (Sheppard, Victoria Park and the aperture) would substantially affect the feasibility of development.

Specific Retail Uses

- A few participants suggested that the existing grocery store should be maintained, that efforts should be made to ensure commercial rents remain affordable, and that opportunities for small or micro business should be created.

Preferences between Alternatives

- Some participants preferred alternative one with its midrise buildings along Victoria Park and tall buildings set back from the street at the node. They felt that this alternative would make the aperture more walkable.
- Other participants preferred alternative two with its tall buildings along Victoria Park (setback from the street) and increased height for buildings at the northwest corner of the node, in addition to those elements present in alternative one. They felt that this alternative would attract a greater amount of investment.
- Still others preferred alternative three with its increased height for buildings at the southwest corner of the node, in addition to those elements present in alternative two. They felt that the node was an appropriate place for additional density and that it would help to provide funding / space for parks, community facilities and specific retail uses (e.g. grocery stores).
- Some participants expressed concern that taller buildings would lead to visual and shadow impacts on adjacent residential neighbourhoods and felt that angular planes should not be relaxed. Others felt that there could be flexibility with angular planes, allowing for taller buildings as long as overlook / shadow impacts were minimized and higher order transit is provided.
- A few participants expressed concern that there was a difference of less than 3000 units between the high and low alternatives and felt that all three would negatively impact traffic.

Employment Areas

Feasibility

- Many participants liked the ideas in the kit of parts but expressed concern about the economics of making these changes and felt that land owners may need financial assistance / incentives to implement changes. Some felt that private investment in the business park would be challenging without transit and other infrastructure investment first taking place.
- Participants offered a number of suggestions to make the business park more attractive to investment, including:
 - Keeping the plan flexible / adaptable to market conditions (although some were concerned that flexibility would lead to more car dealerships)
 - Reducing development fees for employment uses to make costs more competitive compared to adjacent jurisdictions (e.g. York region)
 - Streamlining the development process for employment uses
 - Providing a 'development credit' to spur employment uses (e.g. as is done in York Region)

- Allowing mixed use in the interior of the business park to generate growth
- Some participants expressed concern about the viability / sustainability of retail on the main street and suggested one company be responsible for management so that the main street would function like an outdoor mall.

Specific Uses

- Several participants liked the idea of adding retail and restaurants to the base of office buildings. Some felt that there would inevitably be less retail in the interim and that it may be worth concentrating retail uses to help make it happen earlier.

Greening

- Several participants liked the greening ideas, including encouraging green roofs, landscaping, and privately-owned, publicly accessible spaces (POPs). They felt that these measures would encourage people to walk in the business park.

Parking

- Several participants felt that parking should be maintained because people are likely to continue to drive to the business park. Some liked the idea of parking structures instead of surface parking. Others felt that surface parking was preferable because parking structures would be too expensive and would inhibit people from visiting retail uses.

Branding

- Several participants suggested that the City explore ways to brand / market the business park, including promoting synergies between employment, residential and mixed uses, and installing signage at entry points to the business park.

NEXT STEPS

The feedback shared by participants at Community Meeting 3 will be used alongside the results of the alternatives analysis to help select a preferred alternative. Feedback will be sought on the preferred alternative at the final community meeting in Fall 2016.