

Re: Golden Mile Secondary Plan Study

Summary of Advice from the Planning Review Panel meeting held April 13, 2019

Executive Summary

The Planning Review Panel is a representative group of 32 randomly selected Torontonians that help the City Planning Division guide growth and change in Toronto. They have been asked by the Chief Planner to work together over the course of two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on major planning initiatives. Members are tasked, in particular, with helping to ensure that these initiatives are aligned with the values and priorities of all Torontonians.

Advice re: Golden Mile Secondary Plan Study

The City of Toronto is currently conducting a Secondary Plan Study of the Golden Mile. The Secondary Plan will manage development that is anticipated to result from several new stops on the Eglinton Crosstown Line between Victoria Park Ave and Warden Ave. The study is at the end stages, and the planning team visited the Panel to get feedback on whether their plan appropriately includes the most important planning ingredients to support the growth of a mixed-use neighbourhood, and appropriately addresses potential planning shortfalls.

The Panel identified three key ingredients that the City should ensure is included in their plan for Golden Mile, as well as one potential shortfall that they should be sure to address.

1. Ingredient: Walkability

Panelists felt that it is essential that the Golden Mile transition from a primarily car-centric neighbourhood to one that is easily accessed and enjoyed by pedestrians and transit users. They felt that the City's current plan does address walkability, though greater improvements to the safety of crossing Eglinton Ave E could be made.

2. Ingredient: Community character

Panelists stressed the need to both retain pieces of the community's existing character, while also ensuring that the Golden Mile develops a unique new character that makes it a notable and complimentary part of Toronto's quilt of neighbourhoods. Panelists were not sure that this ingredient is yet addressed in the City's plan, but noted that there may be opportunities to build this ingredient into the plan's design guidelines.

3. Shortfall: Affordability

Panelists were concerned about the long-term affordability of the Golden Mile area as new transit, residences, and public amenities move in. Based on the information they received, panelists did not feel affordability was sufficiently addressed in the plan, though they acknowledged the City has only some mechanisms to control the variables that

create unaffordability. They emphasized that the City should make sure to use the tools at their disposal to ensure a percentage of affordable residences, as well as a range of businesses and amenities that cater to all income levels, both for local residents and the surrounding communities.

Detailed Summary

The City of Toronto is currently conducting a Secondary Plan Study of the Golden Mile. The Golden Mile neighbourhood in Scarborough is, at present, primarily a business district with big box retail, low-rise commercial and industrial buildings, and surface parking lots. Four stops on the Eglinton Crosstown will be situated in the Golden Mile and new development applications for nearly 17,000 residential units have been submitted to the City. The Planning Division is proposing a new planning framework for the area that will guide the transition of the Golden Mile into a denser, mixed-use neighbourhood.

Emily Caldwell, a planner with the City Planning Division, presented detailed information about the location, scale, and current business activity in the Golden Mile, as well as the plan for the further development of residential and mixed-use intensification that will be made possible by the new stops on the Eglinton LRT Line. She provided a very broad overview of the area as it currently exists. She then shared the City's draft plan for creating a connected, balanced community in this area. This plan includes splitting large blocks by creating new north-south streets and a "Golden Mile Boulevard" running east-west. The City also described planned development of new parks and open spaces, the development alternatives for high-rise buildings, and the creation of 4 districts and 8 character areas.

Panelists were asked to address two questions in their deliberations. After watching the first part of the presentation with an overview of the current context of the neighbourhood and prior to seeing the City's proposal, the Panelists discussed:

1. What does the Panel believe are the essential planning ingredients to include, and the planning shortfalls to avoid, when planning the Golden Mile?

Then, after seeing the City's proposal, Panelists were asked a second set of questions:

2. Given the work completed to date, does the Panel believe the emerging plan for the Golden Mile includes the essential planning ingredients and addresses critical planning shortfalls?
3. Why or why not?
4. How could the team improve their plan in this area?

Discussion

Panelists largely agreed on two key ingredients for inclusion in the Secondary Plan, and one shortfall to avoid.

Ingredient 1: Walkability

Panelists felt that while the area currently serves an important role as a shopping district, it is far too unfriendly to pedestrians. Desired improvements to walkability were described by the Panelists in a variety of ways:

- Providing safe access to the LRT, crosswalks, and ways to connect the north and south parts of Eglinton Avenue E, given how wide the street will remain.

- Providing bike lanes, whether painted, protected, or grade separated; and
- Providing places for rest, as well as green spaces that are pleasant to walk through;
- Providing on-street electric vehicle charging and ‘green zones’ around parks.

Does the City’s plan address this ingredient? The Panel largely felt that walkability was well-addressed in the proposed plan, and that the smaller blocks, new street network, and improved public realm would greatly improve the pedestrian experience in Golden Mile. Panelists specifically complimented the new parks, and supported the idea of a ‘necklace of parks’ to connect the larger central parks. However, several Panelists expressed concern that the plan, as they understood it, did not yet sufficiently address how to ensure the safe crossing of Eglinton Ave. One idea to improve this was to incorporate a pedestrian footbridge, or other separated walk way to keep pedestrians, the LRT, and vehicle traffic away from each other.

Some Panelists did question where remaining parking would be located, and wanted to ensure that the area remained accessible to people who need to drive or own a car.

Ingredient 2: Community character

Many Panelists stressed the need to both retain pieces of the community’s existing character, while also ensuring that the Golden Mile develops a unique new character that makes it a notable and complimentary part of Toronto’s quilt of neighbourhoods. Some Panelists described this as giving the Golden Mile more of a ‘village feel’. Others described how they wanted it to transition appropriately and feel a part of the surrounding neighbourhoods. Panelists thought this identity should feel cohesive across the entire district. Given that some of the development will be concentrated in ‘hubs’ throughout the neighbourhood, Panelists identified a risk that the neighbourhood would not feel cohesive, and that the density being envisioned could create a community whose character is out of step with the surrounding neighbourhoods.

Does the City’s plan address the ingredient? Panelists felt that the question of community character was not yet clearly addressed in the plan, though they acknowledged that these elements of community character may come later in the design stage. However, given that the planning framework will include urban design guidelines, the Panelists suggested various ingredients to include in the design guidelines to help create this sense of character. These included:

- Diversifying the building styles;
- Preserving and acknowledging the area’s Indigenous and industrial history in the way of monuments or plaques;
- Treating transitions from lower density surrounding neighbourhoods to higher density areas carefully;
- Ensuring the high density housing is not only along Eglinton; and
- Reflecting the cultural groups who live in the area through design elements.

The Panelists also identified one potential shortfall that the City needs to avoid:

Shortfall: Affordability

Most Panelists identified this shortfall out of concern that as new transit, residences, and public amenities move into the area, the Golden Mile may grow unaffordable as a place to live or shop for a significant proportion of Torontonians. Presently, the area offers shopping options for a variety of price points, which may change as the area intensifies. Panelists acknowledged that improvements in the attractiveness of a neighbourhood, while important for liveability, will also drive prices up. Panelists emphasized that the City should think carefully about how to ensure that the neighbourhood remains accessible to a range of incomes — in terms of affordable housing, but also in terms of the range and type of businesses and amenities that operate in the area.

Does the City’s plan address the ingredient? Based on the information provided, Panelists did not feel affordability was sufficiently addressed in the plan, though they acknowledged that the City has only some mechanisms to control the variables that create unaffordability. They felt it is important for the City to address affordability in all planning exercises, given the degree to which affordability is a major crisis for a large number of Torontonians. Panelists were informed by City staff that 20% of the housing in the area would be affordable (as required in the Official Plan and as per the City’s definition of affordable housing), but felt that this was still an insufficient response.

Panelists also recommended that the City explore mechanisms to ensure that a diverse range of businesses and community amenities be available for residents with a range of incomes. Panelists also recommended some provision for current residents to remain in the community, and proposed that more family units be built.

Other ideas and considerations raised by some Panelists included:

- Ensure that there are amenities for children throughout the neighbourhood, including schools;
- Ensure that there are amenities for seniors and families, such as community centres and places to meet;
- Ensure that there are amenities for pets available throughout the neighbourhood;
- Address potential noise issues from Eglinton Ave on nearby residences;
- Plan in advance for incorporation of any ‘smart city’ technology on the horizon into the building process.