

2.0 IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This chapter documents the need and justification for the REimagining Yonge Street Municipal Class Environmental Assessment (MCEA) Study. Several supporting analyses have been undertaken to develop a rationale for the study, including a review of the City’s policy framework, a review of the existing conditions, and an assessment of the identified problems and opportunities within the Study Area.

2.1 Problems and Opportunities

Phases 1 and 2 of this MCEA establish the existing conditions and framework for the problems and opportunities within the EA Study Area. Based on the description of the existing challenges and opportunities available, a problem and opportunity statement has been developed to address the problems and/or opportunities identified within the Study Area.

2.2 Accommodating Planned Growth

A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Growth Plan [2019, as amended 2020]) promotes accessible public infrastructure that is essential to the viability of Ontario’s communities and critical to economic competitiveness, quality of life and the delivery of public services. The Growth Plan identifies North York Centre as an urban growth centre.

This Yonge Street corridor is the central spine for mobility and the focus for growth within the North York Centre. It has foundational elements for development as a multimodal street, with high capacity transit services, a mix of employment, commercial and residential uses, and institutions framed by public spaces. The corridor provides a critical regional function in terms of accommodating population and employment growth identified in the *Growth Plan* (2019, as amended 2020). The *Growth Plan* (2019, as amended 2020) provides the framework for managing growth and optimizing infrastructure to 2031 and beyond. By 2031, North York Centre will be planned to achieve a minimum growth density target of “400 residents and jobs combined per hectare for each of the urban growth centres in the City of Toronto” (Growth Plan, 2019, as amended 2020). As noted previously, the density of North York Centre reached 460 residents and jobs combined per hectare in 2019.

North York Centre is continuing to experience growth. From 2006 to 2016, the population increased by 19.2%, and based on active development applications, the City is continuing to plan infrastructure needs to accommodate the continued growth in the

Study Area. As of December 2020, the Study Area had 21 active / under review development projects, with a proposed increase of 3,777 residential units and approximately 61,410 square metres of non-residential gross floor area.

The additional growth of residential population and jobs requires an efficient multimodal transportation system for the movement of people and goods. The road network in North York Centre is largely developed, in terms of the addition of the service roads (Beecroft Road and Doris Avenue), which are largely complete, though further extensions are still in the design phase (Beecroft Road from Finch Avenue north to Drewry Avenue and Doris Avenue from Sheppard Avenue south to Avondale Avenue). Enhanced options for travel by foot, bike or transit are needed to facilitate a greater level of mobility for those living and working in the Study Area.

2.3 Planned Transportation Network Improvements

A future extension of Doris Avenue to Tradewind Avenue is planned to complete the North York Centre South Service Road. The Ultimate Condition adopted by City Council in December 2020 would see Doris Avenue realigned north of Sheppard Avenue to connect with a future extension of Tradewind Avenue. This will provide a complete bypass of Yonge Street on the east, from Avondale Avenue to Bishop Avenue, and is proposed to be constructed as early as 2023.

The North York Centre Secondary Plan also indicates a future extension of Beecroft Road to Drewry Avenue, currently in design, to complete the North York Centre North Service Road. The Beecroft Road extension would also include an east-west street in the vicinity of Turnberry Court. Construction for the northerly extension of Beecroft Road is planned for as early as 2024.

Both of these improvements would increase the flexibility of the network to balance traffic volumes between Yonge Street, Doris Avenue and Beecroft Road in proportion to their available capacities.

2.4 Existing Transportation Network

The existing transportation conditions in the Study Area result in various challenges and opportunities; these have been documented by mode below. The overarching issue is a lack of consistent infrastructure to support multimodal mobility. This is needed in order to diversify the transportation options along Yonge Street, providing modal choice to residents, workers, students and shoppers, while increasing the flexibility of the transportation system to adapt to future social and technological trends.

Yonge Street today is a six-lane arterial street characterized by high volumes during peak periods, and high traffic speeds outside of these periods. A raised, planted median

has been implemented in sections of the street. At intersections, exclusive left turn lanes are typically present to accommodate turning demands. During off-peak periods, paid parking is generally permitted in the curbside lanes on Yonge Street.

The configuration of Yonge Street varies from block to block, reflecting the small stages by which the street has been widened, as City of Toronto design standards changed and development occurred. Thus, there are varying lane widths, sidewalk widths and setbacks.

2.4.1 Pedestrian Network

Pedestrian facilities have been improved at isolated locations as development has occurred. However, improvements to the streetscape (complete streets) have not kept pace with the evolution of the corridor into a vibrant urban node. The expansion of amenities associated with high-density development and the mobility hubs at Finch, North York Centre and Sheppard-Yonge Stations has encouraged a significant number of pedestrian trips, with additional walk trips associated with transit riders. However, there is a lack of sidewalk uniformity along Yonge Street, and there are points along the corridor where the width of sidewalk available to pedestrians is constrained. There is the opportunity to enhance this further as redevelopment occurs along Yonge Street. A consistent street design throughout the study focus area would allow for the width of sidewalk available to pedestrians to be appropriate at all locations.

Creation of a successful pedestrian-oriented street requires not only generous sidewalks but also safe and convenient street crossings. Yonge Street is a six-lane road (with additional width created by exclusive left-turning lanes at signalized intersections). In the sections without the landscaped median (i.e. south of Sheppard Avenue, and north of Empress Avenue), the road includes a two-way centre left-turn lane, and is thus seven lanes wide. Pedestrian crossing facilities are only provided at signalized intersections. There are significant gaps between these crossings, particularly in the northern half of the corridor. There is the opportunity to promote and facilitate pedestrian activity by increasing the number of crossings (either at signalized intersections, or between these locations).

Observations of conditions on Yonge indicate that pedestrians frequently cross Yonge Street mid-block, during gaps in traffic created by upstream traffic signals turning red. Many developments on the east and west sides of Yonge have entrances mid-block, resulting in these mid-block crossings (for example, in the southeast and southwest quadrants of the Yonge/Empress/Park Home intersection). However, the gaps do not always occur in both directions of traffic simultaneously. Pedestrians often will cross to the centre of the street during a gap in one direction of traffic and must wait for a gap in traffic travelling in the opposite direction to complete their full street-crossing. The lack

of a raised median in some sections does not deter pedestrians from crossing the 6-lane road, and they are vulnerable to vehicle collisions as vehicles move into the two-way left-turn lane. Streets with six or more lanes have been found to have higher rates of pedestrian-vehicle collisions, and higher fatality rates due to these collisions.

The construction of a raised median where none currently exists could provide some protection to pedestrians that currently cross mid-block and stand in the center turn lane, if designed with non-landscaped segments (as is the case south of Park Home Avenue now). The gaps in through traffic created by traffic signals generally allows enough time for pedestrians to cross to and from the median without impeding traffic. Collision data analysis also supports extending raised medians, as sections where a median exist have fewer collisions, particularly for cyclists and pedestrians.

For the reasons described, the area is not as accessible, attractive or safe as it could be for seniors, people with mobility issues, parents with strollers and other vulnerable road users. There are opportunities to make the area more accessible to these groups, who may not have access to a car. The same applies to young people who are too young to drive, and adults who have chosen not to own a vehicle in favour of occasional car-share or ride-share use. That segment of the population is growing in Toronto, as is the seniors' population.

2.4.2 Cycling Network

A Finch East/West Hydro Corridor, a major multi-use trail is located on an east-west alignment, is located adjacent to the Study Area, and a signed and marked bike route is available along Churchill Avenue between Senlac Road and Yonge Street, however, there are no dedicated on-road cycling facilities in the Study Focus Area. Cyclists are required to ride in mixed traffic, competing with vehicular traffic for road space. They are at risk of “dooring” (a collision that occurs when a stopped car opens its door and hits a cyclist) as drivers exit vehicles parked in the curb lane during off-peak periods. Less confident cyclists use the sidewalk, causing potential conflicts with pedestrians.

The provision of dedicated cycling facilities would improve safety for cyclists currently using the road or sidewalk; this would promote cycling as a viable mode. For those that currently use the sidewalk, physically separated cycling facilities would offer protection from traffic while reducing conflicts with pedestrians. Physically separated cycling facilities would also encourage potential cyclists who would like to ride to work, school or for other utilitarian purposes, but do not currently feel safe doing so. Due to the mixed-use nature of the corridor and surrounding areas, a significant portion of trips are likely made over a short distance. There are numerous trips that may be too far to walk and are therefore currently undertaken by private automobile or transit but could be undertaken by an alternate mode of transportation (e.g. bicycle) instead.

Provision of cycling facilities could extend the reach of transit, which could encourage more people to use both modes of transportation – cycling could be the mode for “first mile / last mile” segments of trips made primarily by transit. TTC and GO Transit operate bus services along the corridor, and Finch Station serves as the termination point for numerous bus services, including York Region Transit and Viva, as well as TTC. The provision of cycling facilities on Yonge Street would allow riders of these various transit services to access locations along the corridor before or after their transit trip.

2.4.3 Transit

The existing transit links in the Study Area can support a modal shift from private automobile to transit. This could be further enhanced by the ongoing upgrades to the subway signaling system and the greater connectivity resulting from the planned future Yonge Subway extension north to Richmond Hill Centre. Previous improvements to bus service along Yonge Street have resulted in measurable reductions in congestion. The enhancement of sustainable modes of transportation would provide more attractive travel alternatives to the private automobile, encouraging future residents to adopt sustainable travel habits and mitigating the impact of population growth on congestion.

2.4.4 Road Network

Queuing currently occurs on Yonge Street during peak periods, primarily in the southern portion of the corridor, from Sheppard Avenue south to Highway 401. This is due in part to capacity constraints beyond the Study Focus Area, such as at the Yonge Street / Highway 401 interchange – the traffic volumes travelling to and from Highway 401 are a significant component of the overall demand.

Opportunities exist to shift traffic to Beecroft Road and Doris Avenue, the service roads parallel to Yonge Street, through design and/or signal operational strategies, which would in turn create the opportunity to reconsider the allocation of space within the right-of-way on Yonge Street to vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists. There are also opportunities to shift parking demand to side streets, Beecroft Road, Doris Avenue, and off-street parking facilities, which would further expand the possibilities for use of the Yonge Street right-of-way.

Enhancing the road network through an extension of Doris Avenue could provide alternate routes for vehicle traffic and help alleviate traffic demand on Yonge Street. Enhancements to pedestrian, cycling and transit infrastructure could shift the mode of travel to alternatives to the personal automobile.

2.5 Streetscape and Public Realm

North York Centre lacks the streetscape and public realm cohesion and design necessary to provide an identity for this rapidly growing and vibrant City of Toronto neighbourhood. The streetscape and public realm that support the quality of life within this corridor comprise a mix of spaces that have evolved in response to varying contexts from one end to the other.

Historical design priorities focused on providing automobile throughput and on-going intensive re-development have resulted in a streetscape where motorists occupy much of the right-of-way (ROW). Pedestrian crossing opportunities and sidewalk clear paths are insufficient for the higher density urban lifestyle emerging. Humanizing elements such as street furnishings, trees and vegetation, and places of respite have been minimized, and opportunities for other transportation mode choices such as cycling have not been realized. The constant pressure from construction activities has left much of the ROW riddled with utility cuts and markings while attempts to implement older streetscape visions have met with varying success. Piecemeal improvements to the street have also resulted in inconsistent design treatments, as City standards evolved over time.

Within the corridor's current ROW (which varies from 30 m to 36.5 m¹), the opportunity exists to reallocate space in favor of balanced mobility choices while incorporating more trees and furnishings that can be designed to unify the corridor and support adjacent land uses – including public and publicly accessible private spaces – that enhance community cohesiveness, contribute to community health, generate economic activity, and elevate quality of life. This is key to supporting walking as a viable and attractive mode interacting with and reinforcing the transit orientation of the area.

2.6 Landscaped Median

The landscaped median is an important aspect of the planning history for North York Centre. In 1988, the architectural firm of Moriyama and Teshima developed a streetscape concept for Yonge Street in the North Yonge Centre, which was adopted by North York Council in 1990. As part of this concept, a central landscaped median on Yonge Street was approved. Conceptual parks and open space plans in the North York Secondary Plan also included components such as planted median and wide boulevards (Section 6.3 (c)(i)).

¹ Official Plan Map 3 “Right of Way Widths Associated with Existing Major Streets” identifies Yonge Street as a 33 m right of way between Steeles Avenue and Sheppard Avenue, and as 36 m from Sheppard Avenue to south of Wilson/York Mills.

The first phase of the Yonge Street median, between Greenfield Avenue/Elmhurst Avenue and North York Boulevard, was completed in the fall of 1992. Extension of the landscaped median in the centre of Yonge Street between North York Boulevard and Eglinton Avenue followed. Since its implementation, the landscaped median has had beneficial effects on the street by reducing the hazard of pedestrian crossings through provision of a mid-point refuge island (with breaks in the landscaping to facilitate pedestrian and emergency vehicle crossings), and by creating a green space in the downtown area, providing design interest, shade, and a unique identity.

The landscape median design detail can be found on City's [Streetscape Manual website](#).

2.7 Socio-economic Benefits

Evidence shows that designing streets for people, as opposed to cars, can provide economic benefits. Comparisons of blocks developed in a suburban, auto-oriented format to those developed in a “main street” format shows that the main street, pedestrian-oriented blocks create more value. Fundamentally, urban streets are places of exchange – whether for social or economic purposes – and for creating wealth. Creating enhanced places for people provides the foundation for creating wealth.

Studies have also shown that streets with fewer through lanes promote greater community cohesion, leading to improved mental and physical health for residents.

There is also the question of equity. The current auto focus of Yonge Street provides mobility advantages to those who can afford a car, and it disadvantages those who cannot (or choose not to) purchase a vehicle. A multimodal complete street would redress this inequity to some degree.

2.8 Problem and Opportunity Statement

Under the Municipal Class Environmental Assessment (MCEA) process, proponents are required to develop and document problems and opportunities that provide reasonable justification to proceed with the project.

2.8.1 Initial Problems and/or Opportunities Statement (Stage 1)

The initial Problem and Opportunity Statement developed in Stage 1 for this study and presented at the first Public Event is as follows:

North York Centre is one of four centres in the City focused on transit-based employment and residential growth. At its core is Yonge Street from Sheppard Avenue to north of Finch Avenue, envisioned as one of the city's

primary pedestrian promenades with a vibrant urban environment that promotes walking, cycling and safe passage across the street.

Today, the area is faced with challenges from inconsistent features such as sidewalks, pedestrian crossings and medians to lack of dedicated cycling facilities and concerns over traffic movement.

The City is looking at ways to create an attractive and consistent streetscape with design appropriate to the civic goals of the North York Centre that will serve people of all ages as they travel in and around the area for work, school and leisure.

2.8.2 Revised Problems and/or Opportunities Statement (Stage 2)

As the study progressed into Stage 2, the problem and opportunity statement was reviewed and revised to incorporate the additional rationale for the study. The problems and/or opportunities statement for Stage 2 of the study is as follows:

North York Centre is one of five key centres in the City focused on transit-based employment and residential growth. This area is envisioned to be a vibrant urban environment that balances the transportation needs of all users, and promotes walking and cycling. To support growth, a street network was created, keeping Yonge Street as a central civic street supported by two parallel streets – Beecroft Road and Doris Avenue.

Yonge Street requires reconstruction to address deficiencies and maintain a state of good repair. Today the study focus area is faced with challenges from inconsistent features such as sidewalks, pedestrian crossings and medians, lack of dedicated cycling facilities and concerns over traffic movement.

The City of Toronto wants to create an attractive and consistent streetscape with design appropriate to the civic goals of North York Centre that will serve people of all ages as they travel in and around the area for work, school and leisure, and that will also support economic activity. Yonge Street, Beecroft Road and Doris Avenue each offer varying opportunities to enhance mobility and safety for all users - cyclists, pedestrians, transit riders and drivers.