

Update Downsview

Local Small Businesses Focus Group

Friday, November 18, 2022 from 9:30AM-11:00AM on Zoom

Engagement Summary

Prepared by the Jane/Finch Centre

Study Background

In January 2022, the City of Toronto launched the **Update Downsview Study**, a generational and transformative opportunity to plan for a new community within the City of Toronto and reconnect the Downsview lands with the surrounding neighbourhoods. Update Downsview is being coordinated with the Official Plan Amendment (OPA) application made by Canada Lands Company and Northcrest Developments for the existing Bombardier airport lands.

The Update Downsview Study includes the preparation of various deliverables, including:

1. An updated land use plan (i.e. Secondary Plan) for the Downsview area.
2. A new Community Development Plan (CDP) that outlines key priorities and strategies for supporting better social and economic outcomes for existing and future residents.

These new long-term plans will guide future growth, development, and community building in Downsview in a collaborative way.

As part of Phase 2 of the Study, the Jane/Finch Centre, a local community-based organization, was contracted to coordinate an equity-driven community engagement process and facilitate a series of focus groups and conversations from November to December 2022. Phase 2 was focused on identifying and confirming the Downsview community's vision and priorities for the future plans.

Focus Group Overview

On November 18, 2022, local business owners, entrepreneurs, and representatives from across the Downsview area participated in a virtual focus group coordinated and facilitated by Elise Antoniadis and Clara-Stewart Robertson from the Jane/Finch Centre. A total of 74 local business owners, entrepreneurs, and vendors participated in the session. Participants included local small businesses in the Downsview area, from Jane Street to Bathurst Street and from Steeles Avenue West to Lawrence Avenue West. For this focus group, Jane/Finch Centre prioritised the participation of business owners and entrepreneurs who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC); women-owned businesses; independent businesses located in strip plazas; and local entrepreneurs and vendors based in the study area but operating without physical space. Individual entrepreneurs included tailors, stylists, decorators, interior designers, and a woodworker.

The focus group provided an introduction to Update Downsview – a City-led Study to update the Downsview Secondary Plan, the Community Development Plan (CDP), as well as sought feedback on the seven draft priorities of the CDP. A CDP is a framework for the implementation of prioritized actions and identified resources that ensure equitable opportunities for residents, community groups, agencies, businesses, local anchor institutions and other rights-holders and people in the Downsview Study Area and surrounding communities. The CDP will endeavor to consider and prioritize social and economic investments.

To help promote the focus group and engage local businesses directly, Jane/Finch Centre staff did three street outreach sessions on the east side of the study area. Two outreach sessions occurred at the two plazas at the Bathurst/Finch intersection on October 31st and November 14th. The third outreach session took place on November 15th, where staff went to local businesses in strip plazas along Wilson Avenue between the rail line and Dufferin Street to distribute flyers that had the focus group invitation and meeting details. These two locations were chosen because of the large number of local small businesses located in the strip plazas. Additionally, the majority of these businesses are owned by BIPOC residents and entrepreneurs.

Invitations and promotional materials were also shared with the Black Entrepreneurship Alliance, Toronto Community Benefits Network, Career Foundation, York University, Wilson Village Business Improvement Area (BIA), Duke Heights BIA, and other local groups and networks to support our outreach to local businesses. In particular, leveraging the BIAs' member networks and social media platforms helped reach a large

number of local business owners who were interested in participating in the focus group.

To start the meeting, representatives from the City of Toronto, Northcrest Developments, and Canada Lands Company provided a land acknowledgement and a brief presentation. Jacob Larsen from Canada Lands Company provided information on the id8 Downsview public engagement process and proposed framework plan. Alicia Rinaldi and John Smith from the City of Toronto introduced the Update Downsview Study, including objectives of the land use plan and the draft priorities for the new CDP.

After this presentation, Jane/Finch Centre staff facilitated an open group discussion with participants using Jamboard around the draft Secondary Plan and the draft Community Development Plan priorities with a focus on access to employment opportunities; establishing an inclusive economy; and business owner/entrepreneur experiences.

Summary of Feedback

Highlights

The key themes of this focus group were:

1. **More financial support for local businesses.** Financial support discussed included low-interest loans, grants for small businesses, and a reduction of prices in different business sectors for vendors who might not have financial stability. Participants said that these kinds of financial aid would reduce the cost of running a small business and would make the business landscape more equal and fair for the future Downsview Area.
2. **Establishing an Inclusive Economy based on equity-principles.** Participants defined an inclusive economy as where everyone is able to participate equally in, irrespective of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or business type. Specific economic and business supports were highlighted for women and Black businesses owners/entrepreneurs.
3. **Increasing support to train and retain new employees for local businesses in the Downsview Area.** Participants discussed how providing businesses with financial support to run mentorship programs, internships and training programs within their businesses can help retain future employees from the Downsview Area.
4. **Improving transportation networks and infrastructure in the Downsview Area.** Improved transportation networks will help connect local businesses to customers, their employees and the broader community. More than that, improving

transportation networks also means allowing businesses to manage the inbound and outbound flow of goods and supplies more efficiently.

Detailed Feedback

Feedback was provided on the draft priorities of the Community Development Plan, the vision of the Secondary Plan, and general transportation challenges. Responses to participant questions from Canada Lands Company, Northcrest Developments and/or the City are marked in italics.

Vision

- One major concern participants had was regarding access to Wilson Avenue for retailers for the businesses. For example, when the new neighbourhood is set up, participants questioned whether the neighbourhood would be accessible to the businesses on Wilson Avenue for clientele, employees and patrons.
- Participants discussed extending roads within the neighbourhood so people can directly access Wilson Village in addition to integrating the future roads into the neighbourhood so traffic can flow naturally from the Ancaster neighbourhood out into Wilson.
- Overall, many participants agreed that for the future of the Downsview area, there should be a way to make the flow of customers from surrounding neighbourhoods to local businesses smoother by having less automobile traffic congesting the surrounding areas.
- One participant mentioned that she would like to see reductions in prices in different business sectors to allow people of different financial backgrounds to start a business; “I think it would be of great help for people who can’t afford to [open a business] or people who are unemployed”.
- One participant appreciated the Vision discussion around the Secondary Plan, as the “Vision will give these businesses a clear focus and can stop businesses from heading in the wrong direction”.

Overall Feedback on the Seven Draft Priorities of the Community Development Plan

- When seeing the overall 7 Draft Priorities, participants spoke about having “equality and fairness” as an overarching theme throughout all of the Draft Priorities. One participant specifically spoke about having “greater participation for minority groups” within each of the categories and ensuring that “there’s an equal right for everyone

in equity and fairness” when accessing the opportunities that would develop out of the Community Development Plan.

- Seeing these draft priorities prompted participants to also mention the financial difficulties of running a business. Participants would like to see more financial support and opportunities for local businesses in the Downsview Area. These kinds of financial support include low-interest loans and grants for small, struggling businesses. Participants said they were not aware of any existing financial support and that these supports should be made more easily accessible for small businesses to find.
- Participants agreed that **Community Safety and Wellbeing** was an important priority to them. Multiple participants said that community well-being is of great significance and it benefits both business owners and consumers.
- Participants agreed that **Access to Healthy and Affordable Food** was an important priority. One participant said that if they had an opportunity to own a restaurant, they would ensure healthier and sustainable food was available “to contribute to the community’s well-being”. Another participant agreed that this was an important priority, saying “In everything, healthy food is paramount”.
- One participant was confused by the language of **Access to Recreation and Below-Market Rent Spaces for Non-Profit Agencies**, thinking that this priority meant that businesses in the area would not make a profit/revenue. A staff from the Jane/Finch Centre addressed his concerns and explained that this priority was intended for non-profit agencies and organisations, such as a community centre.
- Participants further agreed that **Access to Deeply Affordable Housing** was an important priority and of great importance to them. They discussed how affordable housing helps them save their income and can help their businesses. One participant said that deeply affordable housing is “pertinent because it’s the people living in an environment that will make use of any business around there and they are the people that will make it thrive.”

1. Establishing an Inclusive Economy

- Participants said that they defined an inclusive economy as one where everyone gets to participate in the paid economy. Making an economy inclusive for everyone included the following examples from participants: giving grants to small businesses, ensuring that there are social and financial benefits for business owners such as adequate income and stable employment, finding sponsors to invest in different business sectors and establishing supports for young entrepreneurs.
- Multiple participants also spoke about how there should be more support for women and Black businesses owners.

- Participants discussed that an inclusive economy should have an equity-lens.
 - *“The inclusive economy will be a great development that will not be biased, irrespective of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or kind of businesses engaged.”*
 - *“For a society to reach inclusive and sustainable economic growth, conditions must be created to allow people to have quality jobs that stimulate the economy while not harming the environment. An equitable work environment must be ensured and grown, including all members of society.”*
- One participant said that establishing an inclusive economy means investing in public infrastructure, such as education, hospitals, production companies and good transport systems that communities could benefit from.

2. Access to Employment Opportunities

- Participants discussed how social media, publicity, marketing and advertising are the current tools they use to find employees and advertise their employment opportunities. Help from established platforms like the local BIAs’ social media platforms also connects employers to employees which also brings more awareness to their business.
- Participants also discussed how there needs to be more support for businesses to train, educate and retain their employees. Some participants mentioned that without programs or financial support to train and retain employees, they face barriers to keeping current employees. They discussed how they know people who are interested and willing to learn new skills as an employee. However, they do not have the formal training or background to work in a small business.
 - On that topic, participants said that their businesses would greatly benefit from financial support to run mentorship and internship programs to find and train prospective employees in addition to growing the skills of existing employees.
- Another barrier participants discussed to employing people was not earning enough money as a business to hire more employees.
 - *“Mentoring relationships can foster positive and productive working relationships, helping employees learn and gain encouragement and support in their careers. When coached with encouragement, your employees can help your business adapt to changes and reach the next level of success.”*
- Some participants said that they hire within the Downsview area because it's in close proximity to their businesses. They find employees through friends

- which makes hiring easy and quick, saying that they would prefer to continue hiring locally.
- Want to see support programs and advice for small business owners.
 - Need more loans, financial and government support.

Transportation Challenges

- Participants said that improving transportation networks in the Downsview area is very important to the success of their business. In this focus group, businesses did not just refer to public transportation, such as the TTC, although they said that public transportation is important to bring people to their businesses. Their definition included a more holistic approach, including road maintenance, managing traffic flow, supply chain problems and parking solutions.
- For example, one business owners said that he deals with “heavy duty trucks,” which cannot drive well on narrow roads.
- More than allowing an easy flow of customers to local business, transportation networks also provide the flow of inventory from points of origin in the supply chain to business destinations, points of use and consumption. Improving transportation networks in the area would also help businesses manage both inbound and outbound logistics. Participants discussed how transportation connects companies to suppliers and customers, creating an important framework that allows supply to meet personal and professional demands.
- The main barriers local business and customers face travelling around the Downsview Area include finding short-term parking easily (especially on Wilson Avenue), sidewalks being maintained and clear of debris and the need for the beautification of the streetscape to increase foot traffic for businesses.
- Want to see an enhanced transportation system.
- One participant said that there is a transportation inequity exists in Toronto where low-income workers have the farthest commutes to their jobs.
 - *“High commutes have socio-economic causes: jobs tend to be clustered in cities, and workers need to live in relative proximity to their jobs. At the same time, the cost of living in most cities is exorbitant. This forces lower-income earners to live far from the city centres, creating inequities for many communities that are already disproportionately marginalised.”*