

# West Annex Heritage Conservation District Study – Indigenous Community Sharing Meeting

## Meeting Summary

### **Meeting Details**

West Annex Heritage Conservation District (HCD) Study – Indigenous Community Sharing Meeting  
Wednesday, April 1, 2026  
6:30 – 8:30 p.m. (virtual meeting)

The purpose of the meeting was to seek input on whether there are places within the West Annex HCD Study area that are valued by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit community members in Toronto. The meeting was also an opportunity for these Indigenous community members to share histories and stories related to the West Annex area. The feedback gathered from the meeting will inform the project team's understanding of the area's potential cultural heritage value and sense of place.

### **Attendees:**

- 28 community members
- Bob Goulais (Nbsiing Consulting)
- Ana Martins, Colin Yu, Emma Doedens (City of Toronto, Heritage Planning)

The meeting format was virtual and included a formal presentation by City Staff on Heritage Conservation Districts followed by an open discussion period facilitated by Bob Goulais.

### **Meeting Overview**

On April 1, 2026, City of Toronto Heritage Planning in collaboration with Nbsiing Consulting hosted a virtual Indigenous Community Sharing Meeting to speak with members of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit community members in Toronto about the West Annex Heritage Conservation District (HCD) Study.

The purpose of the project is to determine whether the West Annex HCD Study area merits designation as a Heritage Conservation District under Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act. An area's merit is determined through a comprehensive combination of historic research, character analysis, and community engagement.

This virtual Indigenous Community Sharing Meeting was an exclusive opportunity dedicated to seeking input and feedback from First Nation, Métis, and Inuit in Toronto. The purpose of the meeting was to speak with these Indigenous community members and gather their histories and stories related to the West Annex area. The meeting also sought participant perspectives on whether there are places in the area that hold significance to Indigenous people, families and communities and should therefore be

considered within the area’s cultural heritage value. These places could include buildings, landscapes, public spaces, public figures, and/or stories associated with them.

The meeting began with an invocation and welcome from Elder Shelley Charles (Chippewas of Georgina Island). The meeting was facilitated by Bob Goulais of Nbisiing Consulting. As a facilitator who is not advocating for any particular outcome of this project, Bob Goulais’ role was to capture the diverse perspectives shared during the dialogue. This meeting summary does not indicate an endorsement of any of these perspectives on the part of Nbisiing Consulting or the City of Toronto.

Members of the City project team were then briefly introduced to the participants, and Colin Yu (Heritage Planning) offered a land acknowledgement on behalf of the City. Ana Martins (Heritage Planning) gave a formal presentation to participants that introduced the concept of HCD Studies in Toronto and provided background information on the West Annex HCD Study, including a brief overview on the history of the area and the status of the project so far. Following the presentation, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions of clarification about the presentation material.

The meeting then moved into the open discussion period facilitated by Bob Goulais.

### **Discussion Period – Questions and Feedback**

The following section reflects a summary of the responses shared by participants during the discussion period. A series of questions were used to guide the conversation. The questions were crafted by Heritage Planning staff, with input from Bob Goulais. Participant responses have been edited for length and clarity. The summary was provided to participants for review prior to being finalized.

Not all the feedback gathered at the meeting can be addressed through an HCD Study. Where feedback and ideas shared during the meeting fall outside the scope of the project, Heritage Planning staff will share the information with appropriate City departments where possible.

#### **1. Do you have any thoughts on what might make the West Annex neighbourhood special?**

- The natural light that is able to permeate the public areas and park spaces because there are no tall buildings obstructing it. One participant commented how, “when you block natural light, you also inhibit the ability to have gardens and plants. When I think of the Annex I think of low buildings, many trees, birds and animals in the area. You’re at peace.”
  - The harmony between the pedestrian experience, the buildings, and the pockets of natural environment is a special characteristic of the Annex neighbourhood.
- Several participants identified the historic architecture in the area as a special feature. The houses were described as having “character,” and unique designs. One participant explained how it is refreshing to see this uniqueness in the architecture because it represents “part of the old Toronto still,” in contrast to contemporary “cookie cutter” houses.
  - The age and appearance of the architecture creates a link between older generations and younger generations who are both able to see and experience the same buildings.

- One participant highlighted the property at 85 Spadina Road, which was adaptively re-purposed into the Spadina Road TTC Subway entrance, as being a particularly amazing building for its architectural design.
- The West Annex neighbourhood is valued for its public parks. The placement of these parks within the residential streetscapes was emphasized as a benefit to the facilitation of public gatherings because the parks are located within the community itself.
  - These types of large public spaces could allow for events like pow-wows or Indigenous markets. Participants expressed a desire to see more spaces like this, and to be able to use them for those events.
- The West Annex was described as having a strong community identity that is vibrant and diverse, with great food and shopping options located nearby.
  - Participants explained how this community identity differed from the more typical experience of a busy downtown city neighbourhood. The West Annex area has the benefits of being downtown (close to amenities, etc.), but with a more personable character and calmer sense of pace.
- The Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (or the NCCT) was mentioned by many participants as an important social and cultural landmark. Its presence within the West Annex contributes to what makes the Study area special and, symbiotically, its location in a central downtown neighbourhood like the West Annex greatly benefits the NCCT.

**2. What, if anything, would you consider to be important to the heritage of the West Annex area? And/or important to your indigenous heritage?**

- The protection of existing ceremonial spaces for ceremonial practices, and to promote and expand the number of these spaces. For example, the NCCT has a dedicated space for a Sacred Fire. This Sacred Fire illustrates the important connection between intangible and tangible heritage because the cultural practice (intangible) needs a tangible space (placement of the sacred fire area) in order to happen.
  - Full Moon Ceremonies hosted by the Elders living at Wigwamen Terrace (14 Spadina Road).
  - Sweat lodges. A few organizations do have sweat lodges, but many of them are required to use gas powered kilns when the traditional method is to use a wood burning fire. This method affirms a connection with the Earth and a connection to place.
  - City policies should seek to expand the number of spaces where ceremonial practices can occur. The City should also consider how existing policies can be prohibitive to ceremonial practices.
- There is a connection with the Elders and with the land. One participant explained how “...the topography is a heritage place. I’m also reminded of the geography of the land, the soil...the water lines as well as local trails...*Ishpaadina* is named after the way that we nurtured the land,

the way we walked lightly on the land, and the way we brought our families there to nourish and nurture them. The archaeology of the area is not exclusive to one tribe. There are several archaeology sites. What I think of are the trails, the connectors. It may be intangible in a way but it has a very calming presence for the people in that the Elders have been coming and thriving in the area, along those trails, for generations.”

- *Ishpaadina – the high place* is the historic name given to the general area surrounding the West Annex. The name is most associated with the natural bluff running east west to the north of the Study area. The relationship of this landscape and the West Annex is interconnected through the ways that Indigenous peoples move through the land both historically and today.
- “Our first elders gathering in Toronto in contemporary times happened in the area. We are descendants of those ones, [we] are the descents [sic] of our grandparents who came from many communities to meet. The high place *Ishpaadina* was a resting place/lookout towards the island where ceremonies took place.”
- The heritage of the West Annex area is not only reflected in its buildings; it is also reflected in the histories and stories of the Indigenous community who have a longstanding connection with this area.
- In general, there was an appreciation for history and a desire to preserve it. As the city of Toronto grows and expands, future generations need points of contact to connect with the past.
- The historic buildings in the area can facilitate this contact.
  - A participant emphasized the importance of asking the question: “What can we pass down to our children?”
- The deep appreciation for the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto (or NCCT) was evident throughout the entire discussion period. Its importance to urban Indigenous communities, both within Toronto and to those coming from outside the city, cannot be overstated. The NCCT is a community landmark, a place of congregation, of community and social support, of rest and recovery, of knowledge and learning, of creativity and expression, and of homecoming.
- The NCCT is the oldest and largest Friendship Centre in Canada (established in 1962).
  - The NCCT has been the starting point for many offshoot organizations that continue to support the Indigenous community. Aboriginal Legal Services, the Toronto Inuit Association, Anishinaabe Health, and ENAGB Indigenous Youth Agency all began by operating out of the NCCT and have since developed into independent organizations.
    - A comprehensive support system grew out of the NCCT in a very wholistic way. Many needs of the community were addressed there, and the NCCT became a place of potential, a place “where you can dream.”

- Through the years, the NCCT has hosted a variety of programs and social events including food programs, holiday gatherings, and social events with activities like face painting and gift giving.
- In keeping with the tradition of the old trails, the NCCT acts as a contemporary centre of trade.
- The NCCT also facilitates the teaching and experience of traditional music, language, and the creation of traditional art. Many participants mentioned the drumming socials and language classes offered by the NCCT. These programs provide vital opportunities for Indigenous community members to participate in their culture.

### **3. Are there other specific areas that are important to you in the neighbourhood?**

- Other areas in or near the West Annex Study area that were important to participants include:
  - The Brunswick House
  - Tranzac Club (292 Brunswick Avenue)
  - Public murals painted by Indigenous artists, including the Indigenous art mural on Madison Avenue and the mural at Bathurst Subway Station by the woodland artist Tom Sinclair (the storytelling aspect of murals is appreciated by the community).
  - The Indigenous Botanical Garden at Paul Martel Park.
  - The Indigenous garden located at the United Church on Major Street.
  - The Tim Horton's location at Bedford Road and Bloor Street West was a popular place for socializing before the public seating was removed.
  - The Miles Nadal Jewish Community Centre at the corner of Spadina and Bloor & its proximity to the NCCT was highlighted as a positive.
- Wayfinding signage should be introduced to the area to identify all the significant cultural sites and institutions that are located in the Study area, or in the surrounding area such as the University of Toronto, the ROM, the Bata Shoe Museum, Casa Loma, and the history of Davenport Road as an old portage trail. Wayfinding signage would help connect the sites.
- The NCCT is also an important location of rest and healing because of the recovery services it offers. Other organizations with compatible services include:
  - Anduhyaun Inc. (woman's shelter); Thunder Woman Healing Lodge (413 Dundas St E); Birds of a Feather AA Group (meetings held at the NCCT).
- Additional sites mentioned by participants that are outside the Study area boundary include:
  - First Nations House on College; Christie Pits Park; Anishnawbe Mental Health and Addiction (previously at Vaughan Road location); Auduzhe Mino Nesewinong; Native Men's Residence; Toronto Council Fire; University of Toronto; Native Earth Performing Arts; Red Pepper Arts in Kensington Market.

#### 4. What are some of your best memories or stories about the area?

- The NCCT did not start at its current location. It began as a collective before the organization moved into the former Bible College location at 16 Spadina Road.
- Participants mentioned other important individuals who were involved in key roles at organizations in and around the Study area. They include: Jim Dumont (respected elder, renowned teacher and leader); The Late Vern Harper (respected elder); The Late Joseph Sylvester (Anishinaabe Health)
- Several participants shared stories about how their parents and grand-parents were involved with the NCCT, whether in foundational roles or in attending the programs.
  - The father of one of the participants worked alongside Claire Brent, who was the first executive director of Nishnawbe Homes.
  - The participant shared, "...a really good memory [Jim Dumont] talked about was writing the stories of the people that would come to the Native Centre. So he created the *Natives Times of Toronto*."
  - Another participant's father was The Late Joseph Johnson, former Executive Director of the NCCT in 1996, and who was responsible for the installation of the medicine wheel to try and raise money for the community food programs.
- When she was younger, a participant recalled how she "knew the NCCT was the place with the totem pole. When I grew older, the way I found my way back to [my] culture was seeing that [same] totem pole and walking into the building for support. It's a place you can find even if you can't read. The landmark is very prominent. [It is] a place for us to find our way."
  - Similar stories were shared by several participants that indicate how the NCCT is a cultural, community landmark.
  - The experience of the NCCT was described as, "a place where you can see other people and you are connected to them...even if you don't know where they've come from. You feel this cellular connection that's...in this epigenetic stage of being that really is the history of this part of Toronto."
- One participant shared the story of her great-grandmother who went through the residential school system and did not want her own children to experience the same. Instead, her great-grandmother wanted them to go to day school, but in order to do so she had to hide them by relocating to the city. Therefore, when her great-grandmother moved into Wigwamen Terrace later in her life, it was a very significant moment of coming back to the city to a place where her culture was visible and her community was present.
  - For many participants, going to the NCCT was the first time they remember entering a space and seeing themselves reflected in their surroundings, whether through the Indigenous artwork and language on display, the programs offered at the NCCT, or through the other community members.

- One participant shared how going to the drumming and music programs at the NCCT was the “first time I actually heard drumming...it brought me to tears. It just brought me back home, you could say. Back to my roots.”
- There was great love and appreciation for how Indigenous arts have been fostered and developed through programs and events at the NCCT. Participants specifically mentioned individuals such as drum carriers Jimmy Dick and Paul Nadjiwan who would sing at the NCCT and taught other members of the community to sing.
- Wigwamen Terrace, the NCCT, and the Toronto Public Library Spadina Road branch (10 Spadina Road) were all mentioned as contributing to a concentration of Indigenous cultural visibility in this area. This visibility creates a sense of pride, connection, and homecoming for many who visit this area.
  - The library branch was noted for having a lot of Indigenous books and resources
- Several participants shared their memories of having worked at the NCCT at some point in their lives. For some, the NCCT was a key provider of early employment opportunities (such as assistant cook, or working at the reception desk).
  - The NCCT also provided a space for youth to gain confidence in themselves by attending and participating in the programs.

**5. Think of where the Native Canadian Centre is located in the West Annex. Is that important? Why is that important? Would you regard the area as something of an Indigenous hub?**

- Participants were in agreement that the NCCT’s longstanding presence at 16 Spadina Road has established an Indigenous community hub within the West Annex. It provides a place of social gathering and cultural exchange where familiar faces meet up or cross paths, and new faces feel welcome.
  - The NCCT’s central location in the city and proximity to several major public transportation routes and stations means that the NCCT is accessible for many people to get to, regardless of where they live throughout Toronto. This centrality and accessibility supports the NCCT’s role as an Indigenous hub.
  - The NCCT “being close to public transport is important...I love it because...it’s almost in the middle of the city, so that way my friends can’t say it’s too far because of its location.”
- The NCCT’s proximity to academic institutions (such as George Brown — Casa Loma campus and the University of Toronto — St. George campus) was also highlighted as an important feature of its location in the area because it connects younger members from both communities. Each organization can inspire and show the younger generations what is possible.
  - Indigenous students from communities in the far north come down to the University of Toronto for summer programs. Having the NCCT nearby creates a point of connection for these students, a safe and familiar space for them even while they’re far away from home.

- One participant described how the historic architecture of the University of Toronto buildings instilled in her a sense of awe and importance when she would visit the area as a child. When her own daughter attended the University of Toronto, she appreciated how the historic buildings were still present and connected her past memories with her daughter’s current experience.
- There was a conversation about the Indigenous belief in the spirit world. There was reference to “ghost stories” associated with NCCT where the spirits of those who have passed on may remain connected to a physical area. This is consistent with the belief that there is spirit in the place and within the building itself.

**6. Do you see the Native Canadian Centre as part of the overall Annex community, or do you view it as a separate space?**

- The NCCT was generally viewed to be part of the overall Annex neighbourhood. Responses mentioned how the area was accessible as well as being a safe and desirable location to visit because of its beautiful architecture, its institutions and amenities, and its vibrant energy that is not overwhelming (the area feels less hectic than others in the city). These factors all contribute to the sense of welcome felt by many who go to the NCCT.
  - Its central and transit accessible location contributes to the large number of people who are able to gather at the NCCT, which fosters a lively exchange of social interactions.
  - The NCCT’s proximity to the academic institutions in the area attracts younger generations and contributes to a diversity of age demographics.
  - By virtue of being located in the West Annex area, people who visit the NCCT can also patronize businesses along nearby Bloor Street West and this routine becomes part of the whole experience.
  - Many users and visitors of NCCT have found their way to healing, wellness and recovery. The NCCT’s role as a recovery hub serves many in the West Annex community. It is a safe space for all people and is not exclusionary.
- Participants expressed concerns over how changes to the area (such as rising rent, reduced transit accessibility, and reduced inclusivity) could impact urban Indigenous communities and how comfortable or uncomfortable community members feel within the neighbourhood.

**7. Are there any other locations that provide Indigenous services in the immediate area that need to be mentioned?**

- Some responses related to Indigenous agencies/organizations have been combined with similar responses to previous questions. Refer to the specific organizations mentioned in response to Questions 2 and 3, some of which are not within the Study area but are important to the Indigenous community.
  - Participants appreciated the connection between the Native Youth Resource Centre (655 Bloor St W), the NCCT, and the Elder community in the area because the mutual support

prevents individual isolation and isolation between generations. More ways to connect these communities should be explored.

- Many Indigenous agencies and organizations use the NCCT. Many referrals come from the Centre, and go to the Centre. There have been changes to the NCCT over the years and there is a perception that the organization has become less focused on programming and more focused on direct services. While the participants expressed their appreciation for the services provided by the NCCT, many wanted to mention how the programs are important too, and they were/are something that Elders and community members look(ed) forward to.

**8. Do you have any suggestions on how to incorporate First Nations, Metis, and Inuit voices and experiences into future studies like this?**

- Establish a Engagement Advisory Committee to represent the community.
  - Develop working groups specific to youth, women, men, and two-spirit folks.
- Establish Youth Advisory Groups from schools, such as Kapapamahchakwew Wandering Spirit.
- Encourage the collaboration and connection between Indigenous organizations so that there is less competition for funding.
- Host meetings in person and offer free food and beverages. Make the meetings more engaging and personal with activities like door prizes.
- Host and/or participate in gatherings and ceremonies.
- Honour the past and the present by engaging with Elders and observing important protocols like offering tobacco and smudging.