

URA Comments on Unionville Main Street Vision Plan

Preamble

It goes without saying that Main Street and the Heritage Conservation District are important to most residents of Unionville. They are the heart of our community and give Unionville its distinctiveness and cachet. A degradation of the street would cause harm to us all.

The street has significant advantages – its heritage character, diverse and interesting architecture, buildings close to the street, human scale. We believe it is the most walkable street in York Region, as evidenced by the large crowds of pedestrians on good weather days. The street is also very amenable to programming – festivals, concerts, etc.

However, the street is facing challenges and clearly needs revitalization and support in the light of a very competitive retail environment (big malls, big box stores, internet shopping).

URA supported the amended secondary plan/zoning bylaw passed in early 2014 that allowed for restaurant expansion and a broader range of permissible retail offers. We also agree with the premise that the physical structure of the street and environs also need changing to enhance economic vitality.

The Vision

We are aware that numerous visions for the street have been identified. Some residents oppose further residential intensification of the area. Some would like the status quo, plus beautification, or even long for reverting back to the quiet village street of the 1960's. Some residents are concerned about the loss of parkland. Others question whether Main Street should become a cultural hub (art, sports, theatre) rather than a commercial hub. Some residents envision a pedestrian-only street during many periods of the week. Some want a reduction in traffic, especially during rush hour.

In this light the URA held a Vision feedback session on November 3, 2014. Our comments here are based in large part on the results of that event. A summary of the data collected and the raw data are included here as Appendices.

The URA feels that broadly speaking the Vision proposed by the consultants is the most appropriate one. It strikes a reasonable balance in maintain/enhancing the

street's strengths but improving the climate for retail while recognizing constraints in the area. It provides targets to developers that are reasonable but will protect the heritage/walkability feel of the street. (Heritage preservation must stay at the heart of any further development within the Heritage Conservation District.) It provides guidance on necessary public investments. It positions the street to meet both local needs and continue to be a regional destination. The vision does a good job in satisfying the needs of most stakeholders (Parkview School/YRDSB, sports associations and clubs, retail landlords, residents, visitors).

The URA also recognizes the Vision for what it is — a set of guidelines rather than a plan for micromanaging every aspect of the future development of the village.

We recognize that the plan takes concrete steps to improve the retail climate, including enlarging store footprints, adding more retail to boost critical mass, developing junior anchors, locating more residents near to retail and adding other attractions to increase visits. Despite these, the URA remains concerned that even if implemented there is no guarantee that the retail health of Main Street will improve. However, in the absence of other information, we are relying on the expertise of the consultant team.

There are definitely some major uncertainties in the vision, such as

- Commercial viability of an inn at Stiver House
- Reasonableness of no underpass at Highway 7 – GO crossing.
- Reasonableness of a parking structure east of Main Street in light of TRCA concerns and lack of clarity regarding the economic impact.

A final review of this report conducted with members on January 5 identified the following new concerns and elaborations of the concerns above:

- The positions of Metrolinx and York Region must be finalized before any developer can reasonably be expected to do anything within about 200 metres of the current level crossing on Highway 7. There are roles for our regional councillors and MPP to push for clarity on the future of the crossing now.
- There was concern expressed about the potential for future all day 15 minute GO service through the heart of Unionville. Would frequent GO service and the attendant noise and traffic disruption negate any of the improvements recommended in the Vision? Should a tunnel (as was done in Old Weston) be recommended?
- With heavy traffic on Main Street how can ingress and egress be better managed for residents of the recommended new units on the west side of the street?

Nonetheless, at this time, we agree with the consultant to plan for the positive and to push hard to make it come to life once the plan is approved.

Implementation

It is now essential for staff to immediately prepare an implementation report, which should include:

- Available planning tools
- Phasing (timelines) for steps under the City's control
- Funding sources for City work (loans, grants, Community Improvement Plans, Development Charges, Section 37 funds, other)
- Governance recommendations – role of BIA, role of commercial land-owners, retail enhancement plan, progress tracking
- Appointment of a "trustee"/project manager
- Appointment of a Control Architect to guide property owners and the City
- Establishment of a statutory, qualified and independent Heritage Architectural Review Committee to provide required approval of all new developments within the Heritage Conservation District.
- Property tax relief study
- Role of residential community

The URA strongly recommends that citizen involvement continue on this project, per the report recommendation #17, using a multi-stakeholder steering committee to oversee the program, review the impact of the recent OP/ZBL changes and advance public improvements.

We also strongly support the hiring of a "trustee"/project manager with a strong mandate to promote and manage the implementation of the plan, to bridge the needs of the public and private sectors, to source and manage sources of public funding, and to attract the private real estate and retail investment required to implement much of the plan.

While the focus of all energies should be on the implementation of the Vision, the URA recommends that a statutory review of the Vision and any related legislation or regulations (e.g. precinct plan, secondary plan) be conducted every three years. A review would examine the status of implementation of the Vision and its ongoing validity in the face of any new information in the previous three years. This would trigger changes to the legislative and regulatory framework as needed.

Of the very long list of public and private improvement projects in the report, we have ideas on some of the more important short-term physical (public) and management steps that could be taken to advance the vision. These include

Physical

- Start work on washrooms as soon as possible.
- Open up Fonthill/Parkview School gate as a trial for future festivals **in consultation with the YRDSB**
- Reconfigure east and west parking lots under city management (under a \$1 per year lease arrangement from private owners)
- Finalize improved gateways to new Rouge trail system
- Start streetscape design, including gateway features at Highway 7 and Main Street.
- Complete improvements to the Varley Park behind the Millennium Bandstand with a link to Main Street south of the Asuka Sushi restaurant.
- Improve lighting in Blacksmith Lane (Fonthill/Parkview School connection) and on the trail to the Library.

Management

- **Tax relief study**
- **Establishment of permanent governance structures**
- **Appoint a highly qualified "trustee"/project manager**
- **Appoint a Control Architect**
- **Establish Heritage Architectural Review Committee**
- **Develop a unified and cooperative program to attract quality retail**
- **Begin substantive conversations with Metrolinx, York Region, YRDSB and the TRCA**

Please note also that the URA is concerned about the potential for short term failure relative to the east parking deck in light of opposition from the TRCA and likely funding challenges. This could derail the momentum of the entire vision and feed public cynicism. We recommend that quiet dialogue with the TRCA start as soon as possible but that final implementation be scheduled for much later to allow for the inevitable setbacks and to ensure that the cost will be justified by the economic impact. Success of other aspects of the Vision relative to retail health will bolster the case for the parking deck.

The URA is also available to champion specific projects.

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APPENDIX 1

Summary of URA Review of Main Street Vision Plan November 3, 2014

Approximately 25 members attended a Vision Plan feedback session. After an overview of the plan was presented they were given an opportunity comment on each of 5 geographic areas related to the plan. Participants placed their comments under column headings "Like", "Improve" and "Questions". This generated 114 comments. Each participant was then given 8 red stickers and was asked to place them beside the 8 comments they most strongly supported. These are the "ratings" referred to in this summary.

Highway 7 Gateway

Of the 5 areas reviewed there was probably the greatest agreement with the vision for Highway 7 Gateway. The total redevelopment of the area received a high rating (6).

The greatest concerns regarded the level of traffic, adequate transit and facilities for cyclists and pedestrians. One concern about pedestrian and cycling facilities rated 4. A question about traffic management also rated 4.

The heritage feel of the draft designs was also popular, (3).

The gateway concept at Highway 7 and Main Street was also liked (3). However two participants questioned the viability of a welcome centre, while one expressed support for the idea. It seems that clarity regarding the purpose and funding for such a centre should be reviewed before it is approved.

Stiver Mill Area

There was general satisfaction with the current state of this area and the plans for its further improvement. The boardwalk is popular, as is the notion of extending it further west and south, even to the GO station (5).

The proposal of a fountain at the east end is popular (4). This would be a visual draw for pedestrians coming from the north. Some concern was expressed that the area be better integrated with Main Street.

The Farmers Market is popular and moving it to the east end of the site seems to be accepted, though there was plenty of support (5) for a multipurpose market pavilion.

Core West Side

The vision for the West side received strong support -- mix of residential and retail (6), back alleys and residential (4), squares between buildings (3), access laneways (6), destination retail (3), building on the south side of the Smylie lot (3) (though this latter idea also raised some concern.) It was also suggested that the laneways might in some way be covered for the winter.

Particular concerns and questions included adequate parking, retail viability overall and the feasibility of the Stiver House Inn.

Core East Side

The parking deck (4), washrooms (3) and a retail anchor on the east side (2) were all seen in a positive light, though there was one suggestion that the parking deck could be larger, extending further south. Others also questioned the location of the public washrooms (2). The presence of the solar panels also raised some concern (3), presumably for the lack of heritage character. One comment supported the solar panels. There was also some concern about the lack of sufficient greenery on the parking deck.

The most popular suggestion generated in the entire process was the pedestrianization of Main Street (9). While there are of course issues related to the impact of such a move on the retail environment, as expressed early in the consultation process, by Bob Gibbons, it is clear that more days of pedestrian-only access would be popular among residents.

Village Square and Toogood Pond

The notion of integrating all 4 corners of the Carleton and Main intersection was popular (5). Two levels of underground parking under a new double rink was also well received (3) (Note that there was some confusion about the adequacy of parking for the rinks with several participants missing the presence of the underground parking in the vision.)

However support for 2 new rinks and moving the curling rink to Toogood pond was unclear. Opposition to moving the curling rink rated a 3.

There was also some concern about the amount of traffic at Main and Carleton. It is unclear how or if a redesign can mitigate this problem.

Various comments both supported and questioned the necessity of the amphitheatre, presumably in light of the presence of the band stand on Main Street