

On Wednesday, June 3, 2020 representatives of organizations providing community services and facilities in the Downsview area participated in a focus group that represented the first of what will be many conversations regarding the future of 520 acres at Downsview. Participants represented the Jane Finch Family Centre, North York Harvest Food Bank, North York Women's Shelter, Toronto Community Housing (TCH), York University, and TAHJ Consulting (a company that focuses on creating and supporting strategies that impact the Black community using Restorative Practices and Anti-Black Racism models of engagement).

The focus group was held online using WebEx video conferencing software and included a brief introduction of the project from Northcrest and Canada Lands, followed by facilitated discussion between all participants. Consultants supporting Northcrest and Canada Lands also participated, including representatives of Urban Strategies Inc., Henning Larsen, and SLA Architects.

The meeting was facilitated by Nicole Swerhun and Khly Lamparero from Swerhun Inc., who also wrote this summary. As facilitators that are not advocating for any particular outcome of this project, the intent is to capture the perspectives shared during the discussion, not to assess the merit or accuracy of any of these perspectives. This summary does not indicate an endorsement of any of these perspectives on the part of Northcrest Developments or Canada Lands Company.

The summary was subject to participant review prior to being finalized. If you have any questions about what's here, please contact the id8 Downsview team at info@id8downsview.ca.

id8 Downsview

June 2020 Focus Group

Community Services & Facilities

Wednesday, June 3, 2020, 1 – 2 pm

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

Overall sentiment

- Appreciation from participants that Northcrest and Canada Lands reached out to start the discussion. Considerable insight and advice shared, with interest in staying connected as the project unfolds.

Learn from the pandemic and other large developments

- This pandemic experience is demonstrating that it isn't density but poverty that makes some neighbourhoods more susceptible to COVID. Look at how to make the neighbourhood resilient. Social determinants of health, such as walkability, green space, accessible retail, quality of buildings, and public transportation should be important considerations for the new Plan.
- "There is very little space for people to go...the area is not built for people."
- Be sure to learn from other large redevelopments in the city where the unintended consequence was the pushing-out of existing residents as a result of gentrification (e.g. Regent Park).

Keep in mind the history of local Black communities

- Knowing the history of Black communities at Jane and Finch/Black Creek is important. Many of the agencies in this focus group are mobilizing these communities to be part of the many current planning processes that impact them. The id8 Downsview team should connect with other existing projects having similar conversations (e.g. Finch West LRT, Secondary Plans).
- Recognize the long history of Black displacement in the area, including Lawrence Heights, and have this cultural history inform decision-making.

Recognize that this area is a food desert

- Food sovereignty and food security are issues in this area. Of the 48 locations served by the North York
- Harvest Food Bank, the location at York University is one of the busiest.

- The number one reason people need to go to the Food Bank is because the cost of living is so high, especially the cost of housing.
- Discussions are already underway for a social supermarket in the area providing more affordable products with a mandate to hire people on social assistance and to generate enough revenue to be self-sustaining and not driven by the need to make a profit.
- Community gardens provide both beautification and food security, including access to culturally appropriate food, but these have been impacted by the pandemic – TCH had to engage sponsors to help feed their tenants. Thoughtfully consider how food security can be maintained in crisis (e.g. pandemic).
- Think about providing lands to grow and preserve food.

Ensure neighbourhoods are walkable and bikeable, and connected to neighbourhoods in the area

- The area is very suburban, it's unsafe to ride bikes on the road (so some use the sidewalk), and not a neighbourhood that was built for pedestrians. Residents have to walk a long distance to get to places (e.g. grocery stores, food bank, health centres, etc.) and to access transportation.
- It's important to create interconnectedness between communities. Staying connected to City planners during this planning process can help ensure this.

Provide places for people to gather

- Right now there is very little space for residents to go to (e.g. library). The area needs gathering places that are inclusive, welcoming to both new and surrounding neighbourhoods.
- Think about creating affordable and accessible multi-purpose spaces that can be booked by the community (not exactly like the Centre for Social Innovation or Artscape but inspired by them).
- Provide accessible green space, addressing safety considerations and accessibility. Right now, there are a number of small, micro parks and the Black Creek ravine system, but everything is disconnected. Look at how new parks can be integrated with and connected to existing parks.
- Build youth spaces that create programming for youth that they will actually come to.

Create economic opportunities

- Look at opportunities for diverse businesses.
- Create an inclusive workforce development model that demonstrates how the project can create meaningful and valuable jobs. There are many work groups that already exist on other projects in the area related to housing, economic opportunity, social procurement, etc. These projects already have connections to City planners.

Process

- It's important to intentionally engage the Black community.
- Bring a gender lens to the process, thinking about women and children. There is a high population of single mothers in the area.
- Stay away from planning jargon and recognize the power of storytelling – what made us feel good, what made us feel connected in our neighbourhoods? Often there is a disconnect between what a neighbourhood is on a map for a planner and how those who live in it describe it. If a neighbourhood is “a place where I grew up and knew all my neighbours”, then think about what that means in terms of your work and how you build here.
- Important that the engagement process involve the surrounding communities that are seeing the change, and in some cases seeing investment and experiencing displacement. It's important to

see the larger area as a whole and how this project can respond to what the surrounding neighbourhoods have been facing because of larger systemic issues.

- Recognize that there are a lot of youth and families in the area that have been impacted by violence. Important to engage youth and especially hard to reach youth.

NEXT STEPS

Northcrest and Canada Lands thanked everyone who joined the meeting and encouraged people to reach out to their networks to pass on information about the project. The id8 Downsview team committed to staying in touch and encouraged people to not hesitate to get in touch with any follow-up questions or thoughts at this early stage in the process.