

On Wednesday, July 21, 2021 representatives of organizations led by and serving African, Caribbean, and Black communities in the Downsview area and/or citywide participated in a focus group that to discuss the future of 520 acres at Downsview. Participating organizations included:

- *Afro-Canadian Contractors Association*
- *Black Architects and Interior Designers Canada (and Studio of Contemporary Architecture)*
- *Black Planning Project*
- *Canadian Black Chamber of Commerce*
- *City of Toronto's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit's Partnership & Accountability Circle (PAC)*
- *Federation of Black Canadians*
- *FIT Community Services*
- *Jane-Finch Community Hub and Centre for the Arts*
- *TAHJ Consulting*
- *Toronto Community Benefits Network*

The focus group was held online using Zoom video conferencing software and included a presentation on the emerging Framework Plan from Northcrest Development and Canada Lands Company, followed by facilitated discussion between all participants. Consultants supporting Northcrest and Canada Lands also presented, including representatives of Urban Strategies Inc., KPMB Architects, the Centre for Connected Communities, and Monumental.

The meeting was facilitated by Ruth Belay and Nicole Swerhun 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 assess the merit or accuracy of any of these perspectives nor does it indicate an endorsement of any of these perspectives on the part of Northcrest Developments or Canada Lands Company.

A draft of this summary was distributed to participants for their review prior to being finalized – no suggested edits were received. If you have any questions about this report, contact the id8 Downsview team at info@id8downsview.ca.

id8 Downsview

July 2021 Focus Group

African, Caribbean and Black Organizations

Wednesday, July 21, 2021, 4:00 – 6:00 p.m.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

All participants thanked Northcrest and Canada Lands for the presentation, and many said that they thought it was great. Rich feedback and advice was shared – see the highlights summarized below, followed by more detail on each of these points (including responses from Northcrest, Canada Lands, and their consultants).

Highlights of feedback from participants

1. Encouragement to Northcrest and Canada Lands to learn from others; think beyond the physical side of development and make power sharing, affordable housing, economic development, prevention of displacement, etc. much more central to the presentation; and be mindful of imagery.
2. Interest in seeing an intersectional and inclusive lens to design and engagement; different housing models; and a focus on community farming and food security.
3. Toronto has seen many big projects make big promises that have fallen short, and that's a very important learning for Downsview. Community Benefits Agreements are one tool that has seen success in ensuring opportunities for communities that don't typically have access to projects like this one – they also support transparency and accountability.
4. If you want the community to really rally behind this work, we need to see your great alliances with the community and hard commitments to Black and Indigenous involvement.
5. We have an inclusive economies model that we would be happy to share, along with a rich network. We're willing to offer supports.
6. There are existing Black networks to tap into and existing procurement policies and practices to learn from and implement.

7. We need to think about what the process would be for various types of Black communities and firms – whether they be architectural or planning firms or non-profit organizations – to really be a part of this. We’re coming as stakeholders and as partners. It’s also important to think about how to think about and honor the fact that this is the International Decade for People of African Descent in the development.
8. The path forward is one that is unclear, but we know how not to go and what not to do. By moving away from tokenistic approaches and authentically reaching out and listening, some kind of positive way forward will be forged, together.
9. Many of us are part of Black communities across Canada and can facilitate introductions or connections to other efforts to confront racism.

Detailed feedback from participants

Feedback from participants is in regular text, and responses (where provided) from Northcrest, Canada Lands, and their consultants are noted in *italics*.

1. **Encouragement to Northcrest and Canada Lands to learn from others; think beyond the physical side of development and make power sharing, affordable housing, economic development, prevention of displacement, etc. much more central to the presentation; and be mindful of imagery.**

Thank you so much for the great presentation – there’s really a lot to unpack. The presenters mentioned that there were learnings from other cities, like Chicago, like New York. I’d be very interested in knowing what your learnings were? I also have a couple of comments:

- We know that urban design is important and we know that’s only the physical side of development. It’s also important to think about the long-term operational program and power sharing. It’s crucially important that this be discussed. I’m very interested in learning more about the affordable housing, the economic development opportunities, and preventing displacement of, and pressure on, surrounding communities. There are many things that really need to start to come forward and be central to the discussion and in the presentations.
- It’s important to be very mindful of the imagery used so it doesn’t seem as if you’re always commodifying culture. What’s more important than showing beautiful, colourful images is to understand how the Indigenous and Black communities will experience the spaces, get access to employment opportunities etc.

In terms of learning from other cities, we’re really at the beginning stages. The one we have recently talked about is the work that Henning Larsen is doing in the South Bronx, New York focusing on sustainability, affordability, and community initiatives. I’m really humbled by the credentials of this group, and if there are examples of really successful urban projects that we can learn from, please share them. One of the design team members is SLA and they’re involved in a landscape project there focused on reimagining of Detroit, so there are also learnings there. We’re also learning from our own backyard – what’s been successful and what hasn’t. For

example, we haven't had a single conversation about data or smart cities (which was the focus of a recent project by Sidewalk Labs) because we know this needs to be a people-first plan.

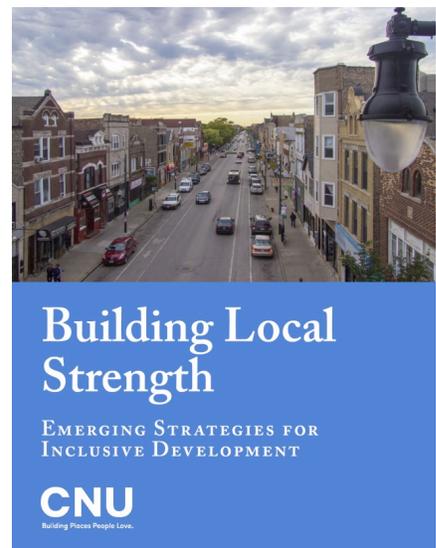
I appreciate your comment about being mindful of imagery. We are very, very careful but we can do better and need to do better.

We heard from the Indigenous Sharing Meeting the other night that it's one thing to say "affordable", but affordable for who? How are you going to ensure that Indigenous people can be here, can start a business here, grow a family here, live and work and afford to play here. We're making a proposal to amend the Secondary Plan, and as a planner, I'm the first one to admit that land use planning is a blunt tool for achieving a lot of things and that's why we're thinking now about how to lay the groundwork for building a community over time. The process we're in now is intended to help point in the direction of those really important outcomes we want to achieve. The whole id8 Downsview team is here, and if there are things that can't be achieved through a Secondary Plan process, then the advice is still useful to have at our fingertips as we continue to work together and build communities.

With respect to existing City policy, there's an area-specific policy for these lands that was created by Toronto City Council earlier in 2021. Part of that includes a requirement that land equivalent to 20% of the residential area (or equivalent) be affordable housing. We will include more details on this when we move to more detailed planning at the District level.

I'm here representing one of the landowners, but I'm a designer by training, and I think what you said about design is very important. This isn't just a physical undertaking but it is, in fact, about program. It's about usability and functionality. I'm hopeful - confident, in fact - that good design includes all of those things. And we continue to reach out to folks like yourselves to ensure that our design will include all of those less tactile but super important things like people and program and usability and functionality and resilience.

Building on the ideas that Kevin and Emily mentioned, we have a vision for this area being a complete community - and when we say complete community, we talk about for people of all ages, of all backgrounds, all socioeconomic status, from the age of 8 to 80. We continue to hear from people in the existing community to understand what they need, we're learning about new ideas of home ownership, rent-to-own, and affordable housing. Northcrest and Canada Lands are in a unique position as long-term investors and long-term owners to try a lot of these things out, many that other developers aren't in a position to do. They may have 2 acres of land and limited by time and budget. Here, we have a decades-long vision of what we can do, over time, and what this community can be. We have time to try different things - like different models of affordable housing - and really get to what works best for the existing context, the people who live here now and want to stay, and also for those who will want to move here in the future. Affordable housing will absolutely be a part of this and it's just a matter of what that looks like. If you have any specific recommendations on what you would like to see, we'd love to hear them.



In response to the request from the id8 Downsview planning and design team, the following resource was shared by a representative from the Black Planning Project: *Building Local Strength – Emerging Strategies for Inclusive Development* (May 2019 report by the Congress for the New Urbanism, linked [here](#)).

2. Interest in seeing an intersectional and inclusive lens to design and engagement; different housing models; and a focus on community farming and food security.

Thanks again for the presentation. We're interested in seeing an intersectional and inclusive lens to the design and to the engagement of the community. Affordable housing should be centred in the work, and it's good to get confirmation that a minimum of 20% will be provided. It would also be helpful to know whether you're considering mixed income dwellings, rent-to-own, or community land trusts. Those are some of the things that should be open and available for us to put on the table to see what would work. It would also be good to know how you're thinking about community farming – something the Black community has specifically been working on and the Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit's work on food security. We'd like to have a sense of how communities will be actually, tangibly integrated into the work that's being done and also how you'll hold safe Black spaces and safe Indigenous spaces in the planning process.

Canada Lands piloted an urban farming project in Downsview Park 2009/2010 and the success of the pilot has led us to commit to a full-time permanent urban farm at the south end of the park, which we're working on right now. The building is out of the ground and it will be cultivated – with a number of groups – next year. That leaves an opportunity for other urban farming in the existing pilot project area, or in other areas in Downsview Park, and interwoven within the various Districts as they begin to unfold over the next number of years.

One of the policies we will be proposing to the City of Toronto is that urban agricultural community gardens be permitted in public parks, because we know that trying to implement those after the fact can sometimes be a hurdle – so we're trying to put it in from day one. The “long meanwhile” period could also be a time where for 10-15 years there could be communities that garden and farm together. Eventually we also see potential for beautiful landscape on the roofs of midrise buildings that could be perfect for smaller, family gardens. This is also important in addressing the fact that this area is considered a food desert.

In terms of engagement, this has been part of the project from the beginning. Engagement started over a year ago and will continue for the next 30 years. Connection with community and understanding community – all of that is crucial to the success of the project and to the success of the community. We also want to hear how communities want to be engaged. We heard that we need to do meaningful engagement with marginalized communities, with African, Caribbean, and Black communities, and with Indigenous communities. We're taking everything we're learning and will apply it as we continue engagement at the District Planning and more detailed planning stages. We're also created a Community Resource Group to continue to advise us over time. This is really just the beginning.

In response to the comments from the id8 Downsview team, a participant flagged the power of language and suggested the team stay away from using words like “marginalized” or “at risk” and instead reference “underserved” or “under resourced”.

3. **Toronto has seen a lot of big projects make big promises that have fallen short, and that's a very important learning for Downsview. Community Benefits Agreements are one tool that has seen a lot of success in ensuring opportunities for communities that don't typically have access to projects like this one – they also support transparency and accountability.**

I think it was a great presentation – and good to learn more about the vision. In Toronto, we've seen a lot of big projects like this that have come forward and made some really big promises to community. And projects have also fallen short, and I think that's a huge learning that is very important to bring to the space. There has been a focus on seeing how we can ensure more equity, diversity, and inclusion within the planning development process and more accountability. Community Benefits Agreements are one tool that has seen a lot of success in Toronto to ensure accountability within the planning development process long-term. As the developments for these lands in Downsview come forward, I propose the use of community benefits agreements to really ensure accountability and transparency around the great ideas and promises that are made within the process. This aligns with:

- Past experiences with fairly significant sized projects worth billions of dollars in Toronto, including the Casino Woodbine expansion in Rexdale which included a Community Benefits Agreement that was negotiated in 2018.
- Thinking at the federal level, which has a community employment benefits initiative that looks at opportunities for specific equity-seeking groups including Indigenous peoples, women, persons with disabilities, veterans, recent immigrants, and also small and medium-sized social enterprises. That program has been applied to some of the large scale infrastructure projects in our communities.
- Four new transit projects being planned for the Toronto region, with funding conditions that include the need for community benefits agreements.
- The 2019 decision by Toronto City Council which approved the Community Benefits Framework Policy to guide municipal infrastructure, as well as purchasing and real estate developments.
- Work we've done with CreateTO around some of the Housing Now projects too see if there could be an opportunity to include some of those workforce development opportunities for equity-seeking groups as well as social procurement, as well as opportunities for minority-owned businesses and contractors.

I strongly suggest that as you develop these lands:

- Your work aligns with some of those examples as well as the policies and objectives at both the federal and municipal levels of government.
- You be ambitious and proactive in coming forward with details related to community benefits. You spoke a lot about the generation of new employment opportunities, but who is being prioritized for those opportunities? You know that inequality has been rising in the city of Toronto and now with the pandemic there are multiple reports and data to show how

inequality has been increasing and the economic, health, and social impacts on racialized communities, women, youth within our communities.

At TCBN, we run apprenticeship training programs for people getting into the construction industry. The provincial data from 2017 tell us that there are only small percentages of women, Indigenous, and racialized apprentices that are registered with the Ontario College of Trades. There will be billions of dollars worth of construction work happening on your lands in Downsview. There needs to be an intentional effort and hard targets set through a community benefits agreement that's public and transparent to be able to hold you accountable, and all stakeholders accountable, in the process.

Lastly, I highly encourage your vision to be more ambitious around affordable housing targets. I don't think the 20% minimum that the City is exploring is sufficient, and that something higher like 30-40% should be considered.

Thank you, that's a lot of great advice and feedback to unpack. It's definitely something that we've heard from other meetings, especially about being strategic around workforce development and community benefits. The idea of a community benefits agreement has been proposed and it's something that I know we are consider and that we should continue talking about. It's a conversation that we want to have with your organization, with other organizations, and other stakeholders to understand the potential benefits to everyone. We couldn't agree more that this pandemic has amplified the existing inequities in the northwest part of the city. We know it's among the highest for COVID infection rates and job losses. I know this is an area of the city that could use the support form the potential benefits that will come from a project like this. There are obvious benefits - like the Section 22 type investments in social infrastructure and other things - but there are other ways investments can directly benefit the existing community. I can assure you that those are the types of things that we want to focus on, like supporting local contractors, creating a skills pipeline for youth in the area, and partnering with institutions in the neighbourhood to provide workforce development opportunities. What exactly the details are, that's something that we'll get into, but the premise of supporting the community's needs is absolutely something that we're going to be focusing on.

Your local Councillor is the Poverty Reduction Advocate for the City of Toronto on Council and in almost every conversation we have with him he mentions almost exactly what you're saying about the benefits accruing to the local community - we definitely hear it loud and clear.

From a corporate perspective, we have to think creatively about how we do all this, and when I saw "we", I mean "we" - all of us together. We have to think about how we approach things moving forward because I don't think that "business as usual" will cut it. What we want to do - and what we will do - is get our head around an approach and a process and think creatively about how we go about taking on the many tasks that are in front of us to get the districts developed.

In terms of design, you can imagine the opportunity that a site like this holds in terms of creating an opportunity to build in Downsview, for Downsview. The potential for skilled labour, how to apprentice, learn skills, become a master builder over generations could

unfold here. For example, we could see a mass timber plant on the site. There could also be other construction specialties, just the way other neighbourhoods in Toronto have been built over decades. We could have several generations of new construction technology and ways of building that could be explored. Also opportunities for Indigenous architects, Black architects, and others in Toronto to bring their expertise to the future design on the site, the landscape, and the buildings.

In response, a participant reinforced the importance of thinking about generating equitable economic opportunities through phases and that there are many ways of achieving goals, including: minority contractors and social enterprises, as well as opportunities in operations, budgeting, accounting, and human resources roles, and also in the long-term with operations and maintenance.

4. If you want the community to really rally behind this work, we want to see your great alliances with the community, hard commitments to Black and Indigenous involvement, and presence in the decision-making.

I'm looking for harder commitments like "we are working with this Black architect" or "these Indigenous architects" or "these queer perspectives" and that they'll be integral to designing the Depot or that "we're going to ensure 10% of our contracts for construction go to these specific groups". I understand that you're still at the ideation phase, but as you're progressing, think about who you're aligning with and who is helping you make the right decisions. What I'd really like to see as I watch this development grow is that you're really standing and making a claim – from design all the way through to maintenance – that you're committing to providing opportunities where we can see ourselves right in what is happening. I want to hear about some of the great alliances that you've made with the community and see them present in the decision-making. Honestly, I think that if you want the community to really rally behind you, we can't just be the people who show up and live in the space you build. We actually want to be part of putting the bricks and mortar together, be the people that have the businesses that are part of deciding how the place stays sustainable and meets its green energy goals. A place where we're excited to be part of the team. We also want to hear about how you're working with Indigenous communities, and what construction practices you're innovating. Those are the kinds of things we'd like to hear.

Thank you so much for this. It's something that we've heard before and that we're responding to. We can't share more information quite yet (because we're not far enough along), but we are working on the design of a new community centre with an Indigenous architect called Two Row Architects. This is one of the first tangible examples of integrating Indigenous values into the design and we hope this is one of the first things that we'll be able to deliver – and continue doing not only with Indigenous communities, but with local contractors, architects, and others. We are just beginning, and this is absolutely something we will continue to do going forward. .

5. We have an inclusive economies model that we would be happy to share, along with a rich network. We're willing to offer supports.

We're all ears. We're here at the front end of this project to learn as much as we can to ensure that we take into account all of the people who can contribute to this community building exercise.

This meeting is being held, in part, because right out of the gate Northcrest and Canada Lands heard from participants in the id8 Downsview process that it's important to be intentional about the engagement of Black communities. Then we had follow-up conversations with the City's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Unit and follow-up calls with many people who are in this meeting. This is a learning journey for many people and the good advice that you've been providing is super helpful. If you have thoughts about specifically how Northcrest and Canada Lands could continue this process in a way that works for you, please share them. For example, Northcrest and Canada Lands have retained an Indigenous facilitator and meetings are held specifically for Indigenous voices. If you have suggestions on how to embed a dedicated discussion with Black-led, Black-serving organizations, then we can move forward in a way that makes good use of your time, it would be great to hear your process advice.

6. There are existing Black networks to tap into and existing procurement policies and practices to learn from and implement.

Thank you to everyone for the comments and presentations. I'm one of the co-founders of the Black Architects and Interior Designers Association (BAIDA). We have strong networks of individuals from the Black community who can provide assistance or support, and we're here and available to be contacted or to help with outreach, if that's desired. I can provide some contact information to you after the meeting.

I have a question regarding whether there's an existing process that's been considered to ensure that opportunities – whether its for providing affordable housing or cultural spaces or businesses – for Black-led organizations and companies to have either an ownership stake in the land or buildings, or long-term leases. What would the process actually look like to identify the groups that could take ownership of or obtain long term leases on specific sites? And how, even at this early stage, can targets be created for diverse communities to ensure that, moving forward, there's a lot of opportunity?

It is a bit early and there isn't a process engrained in our thinking yet, which is probably, in a way, good news. It means we can build a process. There's a procurement process within Canada Lands that might not be appropriate going forward for this particular project. I think that we're early enough in our broader process to work to incorporate the sorts of advice you're providing.

It's really interesting to know that Canada Lands may have to create new processes to allow access to Black, Indigenous, and other communities. I worked for Walmart, for example, and we have standards when it comes to sourcing with thresholds. It's an opportunity for Canada Lands and Northcrest to take leadership and show how that can be done, with guidelines and policies that you must adhere to.

We look forward to exploring ways to open up procurement practices and processes to provide greater access to opportunities in the future. This is definitely a space for innovation as Northcrest and Canada Lands move forward in the process.

7. We need to think about what the process would be for various types of Black communities and firms – whether they be architectural or planning firms or non-profit organizations – to really be a part of this. We're coming as stakeholders and as partners. It's also important to

think about how to think about and honor the fact that this is the International Decade for People of African Descent in the development.

The presentation was great and I'm really pleased to hear how everyone wants feedback for the project and where the conversation has been going. I have a few things I'd like to share:

- It's so important for us to bring – to this moment – the conversations that have been happening for years now related to opportunities for different Black-led consortiums and committees to be a part of the design and planning process; be a part of operating businesses; be able to hold leases, and participate in opportunities to be in different spaces within the communities and neighbourhoods that are being planned here. We need to think about what the process would be for various types of Black communities and firms – whether they be architectural or planning firms or non-profit organizations – to really be a part of this. It's no longer enough to attend a ratepayers association community gathering. We're now coming as stakeholders with various rights and voices. We're coming as partners to build capacity, including those at the table as well as those voices that aren't at the table. I'm really hoping that gives you good feedback and insight in terms of our interests in understanding what we may have access to, what we're able to build in the short-term and long-term, how different parts of Black communities will be enabled and not enabled – and that's the reality we need to explore through this exercise.
- It's also important to remember that this is the International Decade for People of African Descent. It would be really nice to think about and honor that within the visioning process for public spaces in the development. Think about heritage landscapes, really intersecting words like livability and beautification, and thinking about how we want to enable Black spaces, and how we want to illustrate and demonstrate and live Black spaces in various neighbourhoods in this development. Think about what type of contemporary experiences are going to be provided? Is it going to be public art installations? The naming of streets? How are we memorializing the contributions of Black Canadians in this space – whether those contributions were made by force or voluntarily. Also be mindful of storytelling and who gets to tell the story and how we're going to capture that. There's so much that we can really participate in and speak to, in terms of the design, the livability, signage, textures, how spaces use function and form. You have a lot of professionals at the table and I think it would be a great opportunity to somehow mix it up a little bit. I hope this is helpful.

I just want to say how incredibly helpful that is – perfectly well put. With a project this big and timelines that are so long, a big piece of work we have to do is just to understand what is there now, understand the networks, understand the needs of communities as they exist today – in order to then develop best practices and to develop ways to support some of those community needs. We're working with the Centre for Connected Communities to help us understand the lay of the land, what organizations are out there, what networks exist that we can connect with and bring along into the circle of design, development, and partnership. We're just at the stage where we're working to understand what exists, but everything you said will be part of the way that we look at this going forward.

8. **The path forward is one that is unclear, but we know how not to go and what not to do. By moving away from tokenistic approaches and authentically reaching out and listening, some kind of positive way forward will be forged, together.**

In response to the question of how we go about this, I'm not sure we know how to go forward because it's such fresh ground and we're all finding our way. What we can definitely say is how not to go. Tokenistic is how not to go. Including somebody at the beginning but not through the process is how not to go. Downloading all of the effort and questions to communities so they can answer them is how not to go. Not to make communities part of the process is how not to go. There are just so many ways how not to go, and then eventually, within these negotiations, some kind of positive way forward will be forged. It's definitely not enough to get Black architects or Indigenous architects to design a community centre or public space murals. It's really about the entire development. Really moving away from tokenistic approaches and authentically reaching out. Listening like you have wonderfully done and moving forward with the community.

Thank you. If we don't do those things on the "not to do" list then, presumably, the other things we do end up doing will help find a path - a path that can only be found together.

9. **Many of us are part of Black communities across Canada and can facilitate introductions or connections to other efforts to confront racism.**

NEXT STEPS

Ruth Belay, facilitator from the Swerhun team, thanked everyone for their feedback and comments, noting that all participants benefited from hearing what was said that that this is the first of many conversations.

Ian Hanecak (Northcrest) thanked participants for taking time out of their evenings to attend, noting that: this is the starting point of what will be a continuous and ongoing conversation to really dive into some of the things talked about today; and that what the process will look like will be something we work with all of you to figure out, as well as others we hope to bring into this conversation as it develops over time. He wrapped up by saying that he's really encouraged by the feedback, really appreciates it, and looks forward to seeing everyone again soon.

David (Canada Lands) noted that earlier in the meeting he had referenced the recently held Indigenous Sharing Meeting as powerful and impactful - and that this session has been every bit as powerful and impactful, and quite humbling. He thanked participants for their commitment, for pushing Northcrest and Canada Lands, and sharing his belief that the two organizations are up for the challenge. He wrapped up by saying that he's really looking forward to the next conversation with this group and that he hopes participants remain as committed and as engaged as you were tonight.

Nicole encouraged participants in the meeting to apply to the id8 Downsview Community Resource Group and committed to sending links to the application and the terms of reference ([also available here](#)). Id8 Downsview Community Resource Group will be one accountability mechanism and a space to represent the diverse interest of stakeholders.