



## Davenport Community Rail Overpass

### Davenport Community Rail Overpass *Reference Panel Day Two Report – May 9, 2015*

On the morning of Saturday, May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015, members of the Metrolinx Community Rail Overpass Reference Panel returned for Day Two at the Davenport Perth Community Health Centre. During the two weeks since their first meeting, panelists had the opportunity to speak with friends, family and neighbours about what they had learned and also to collect feedback to share with the Panel.

Panel Moderator Peter MacLeod started the day by reorienting the group in order to get back into the learning process. MacLeod reminded the group that, as panelists, they are tasked with learning about transportation planning and processes, weighing design options and approaches, and proposing values, priorities and detailed recommendations in a final report to Metrolinx that will shape the design and delivery of the Davenport Community Rail Overpass project. MacLeod told panelists they would be hearing from a varied group of community representatives and design and urban planning experts, as the purpose of this session is to motivate panelists to start thinking about tangible design options.

MacLeod also took some time to report back on the results of the group values exercise, which the panelists undertook at the previous meeting. Some of the themes that emerged included: celebrating local history, improving local traffic, enhancing walkability and active transportation routes, engaging the local community, creating a gathering space, and celebrating local art and creative industries. Panelists were encouraged to think of these themes as they begin considering design possibilities and priorities.

The first speaker of the day was Elise Croll, Director of Environmental Programs and Assessment at Metrolinx. Croll had previously addressed the group on Day One to explain the Environmental Assessment Process. She led off with some clarifications about the environmental assessment process, street connection options, and the costs and viability of public realm improvements for Regional Express Rail projects like Davenport. Croll explained that they are still developing the criteria for allocating resources and budgets to public realm projects for Regional Express Rail. However, she confirmed that a portion of the capital budget will be allocated for public realm improvements. She clarified that it will not be a uniform allocation across the system because some areas, like Davenport, have significant potential to benefit from investment as opposed to area with limited potential (e.g. industrial location). She used the example of the



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recent investment by Metrolinx in the Eglinton Crosstown project which allocated 1.5% of the capital budget to public realm improvements.

The presentation provoked a number of technical questions from panelists who wished to confirm some engineering and construction details of the project before moving onto the brainstorming process for their design recommendations. Panelists asked questions about the project budget for public realm improvements, the timeline for transitioning from diesel to electrification, and about the timing of train service increases over the short and long term. The panelists felt that this information was critical for planning possible uses of the unlocked public lands both in the short and long term.

Croll answered these questions as directly as possible with the available information, noting that many of the details are limited at this stage of the project. The panel moderator MacLeod reminded the room that Metrolinx has come out early and proactively to do consultations before 'decisions are set in stone' and the consequence of this is that not all answers are available. He also suggested that Metrolinx come back to the panelists on Day Three with more information about electrification and service increase timelines.

Next the Panel heard from Beth Kapusta, Senior Manager of Design Excellence at Metrolinx, who began her presentation by telling the panel that during her time at Metrolinx she has witnessed a transition in their design thinking towards the aspirational. "We focus on the human dimension of design," she said. "Our job is to advise a big picture approach to each project, identify the design opportunities and make them a priority." She remarked that the reference panel approach would be appreciated by someone like the urbanist Jane Jacobs, a strong proponent of bringing the wisdom of the local community to bear on planning. She concluded by encouraging panelists to be pragmatic *and* aspirational, saying, "be as creative as you can be in the conversion of your experience into clear and straight-forward recommendations". She advised that, as an architect, having a "clear design brief" is essential to ensure that the panel's principles act as a strong guide throughout the design process.

The next speaker was City of Toronto's Chief Planner, Jennifer Keesmaat who presented on the local planning context and the City's responsibilities in this process. Keesmaat began by recognizing that there can be tensions between regional and local interests, and reminded panelists that her role is to support local interests and to implement the City's Official Plan. She elaborated on the complex web of policy guidelines, both provincial and municipal, which direct the City's planning department. She highlighted the diversity, heritage and complexity of land uses in the Davenport corridor, noting, "It is a real mix: there's employment lands, mixed use areas, residential, parks and open space".



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In terms of transportation planning, said Keesmaat, the City's broad goal is to increase options and to address gaps in transit infrastructure. To that end she said that the City was looking to Metrolinx to build a new station on the GO Barrie line at Landsdowne Ave. and Bloor St. as identified in the City's Official Plan. She said that this aligns with the City's and Metrolinx's shared goals of promoting transit, reducing dependence on the car, and providing reliable, fast service to busy destinations like York University. She emphasized her mandate as Chief Planner to uphold heightened standards for walkability, connectivity and cycling infrastructure. "Most trips we take are under 5 km," she noted, "the kinds of trips people can and will do on bikes, on foot or on transit if given safe, accessible options". She closed by saying that she is looking forward to getting down to work with Metrolinx in negotiating "the things that are a given and those that are aspirational about this project."

Discussion followed both Kapusta's and Keesmaat's presentations regarding the parameters of what is possible in the corridor, the assignment of roles and responsibilities, and how best to balance pragmatic and aspirational design principles for the project.

Next panelists had the opportunity to hear from three local community representatives on the topic of "complete and connected communities". This group of speakers included Liz Sutherland from Cycle TO, Scott Dobson from West Toronto Railpath, and Vic Gedris, a resident and blogger from the Junction Triangle. They presented their thoughts on the proposed project and offered their insights on potential improvements to connectivity and public spaces. Liz Sutherland presented a map of priority roads and proposed bike lanes in the area and made recommendations for specific connections to improve active transportation routes. Scott Dobson reflected on his involvement with the West Toronto Railpath, and advised stepping back from the small details of this path and considering the whole west end and "how we can create shared infrastructure." He also advised ensuring a legacy program is in place, stating, "In a strange way, the easiest part is getting it built but you also need to think about this 50 to 100 years down the line, the stewardship and partnership you need to maintain it." Finally, Vic Gedris, a resident in the area, said in his view, "we need to look at this as a neighbourhood connection project" as he went street by street emphasizing the opportunities at hand to better connect the community.

After taking a short break to grab a sandwich and stretch their legs, the group took in a comprehensive presentation by urban designer Melanie Hare (Urban Strategies) and architect John Potter (Perkins & Will) highlighting well-designed public spaces and infrastructure projects. The global design precedents were provided to panelists to get creative ideas percolating in advance of the design flare exercises in the afternoon. Hare began by stressing the importance of



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place-specific ideas, saying, “we need to think deeply about the distinct areas of your community, how you use it, how you move through it, the opportunities and challenges at hand.”

Next, Hare showed a map of the five zones of opportunity: Paton Road, Wallace Avenue, Campbell Avenue Park, Dupont Street, and Davenport Road. She highlighted some of the uses and characteristics of each area. John Potter then took the group through a number of international transit and transportation infrastructure projects to demonstrate the range of urban design approaches to consider. He recommended thinking of this project as a blank canvas, and to think both at the micro and macro level. He pointed to innovative approaches designers have taken in Toronto and around the globe to lighting, plantings and landscaping, retaining wall designs, micro-business opportunities and public art partnerships for both structures and unlocked public spaces.

After a morning of introduction to design principles, it was now time for the panelists to document their experience and knowledge of current uses of the area and to provide recommendations on how it could be better used in the future. The panelists moved to any of the five tables representing a zone of opportunity (Davenport Road, Dupont Street, Campbell Avenue Park, Wallace Avenue, and Paton Road) with which they were most familiar. They were asked to identify the distinctive features, strengths and challenges as well as record how they move in, around, and across the zone. On the second map, they were asked to identify where and how they want to make improvements to the zone and how they would strike the right balance of activity and connectivity, quiet spaces versus active.

Following the group design session was the second Community Panel, on “community impact and design”. This panel consisted of Donna Cowan from the Dupont Improvement Group, Dyan Marie from the Bloordale BIA, and Jason Campbell from the Bloor Improvement Group. Representing resident interests, each panelist presented a passionate presentation on their broad views of the overpass project and their recommendations for moving forward. Donna Cowan spoke about the preference of local residents for electric, local transit asserting that “GO transit would be enhanced if the trains were electric from the very beginning as electrification would allow for more stations which would address local concerns”. Next Dyan Marie performed an expressive spoken word piece to convey the perspective of the Bloordale BIA, which prefers leveraging opportunities for quiet green space rather than commercializing the area. Finally Jason Campbell advocated for considering the broader impacts of the project, suggesting that “this great transformation in West Toronto will lead to greater physical, cultural, and economic opportunities that everyone will benefit from, not just residents of Barrie”.



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The diversity of opinions of this last panel sparked lively discussion in the room. Panelists asked the speakers to get specific on their ideas for potential business opportunities underneath the path, which brought out a disagreement among Dyan, who disagreed with the sentiment of commercializing the space, and Donna, who expressed concern that in the absence of commercial activity the area would go unused by residents. One panel member commented, “it’s always difficult to distinguish where your community begins and where it ends” but noted that their job was to consider local interests not *only* regional interests. This sparked personal accounts from each speaker about the direct personal impacts of the project and their thoughts on how to reconcile conflicting local and regional interests.

The last exercise of the day allowed Panelists to share their earlier work identifying current uses and recommended uses within each of the five zones. In this sharing exercise, most Panelists rotated tables while two Panelists stayed behind to ‘host’ and summarize their table’s findings for the ‘visitors’. Each group then shared their feedback and discussed their ideas, laying the groundwork before making particular design recommendations. The panel took in a sizable amount of information on Day Two and returned home with even more material to comb through. They left having much to reflect on, as it will be in their hands to decide how to incorporate the design principles they learned about on Day Two into their final recommendations.