Eglinton Connects is a comprehensive Corridor Planning Study that takes advantage of a $5.3 billion investment in a 19 km long light rail transit (LRT) line in Toronto. The study proposes a holistic Vision for the Eglinton Avenue corridor, a detailed public realm, streetscape, built form and open space plan, and an accompanying implementation plan. It represents the next generation of ‘Avenue Study’ for the City; one that considers all elements of urban development together to create a sustainable, diverse and accessible future. The Study was approved by City Council in May, 2014.

Toronto is Canada’s largest city, the fourth largest in North America, and home to a diverse population of 2.8 million people. It is a rapidly growing and evolving global centre for business, finance, arts and culture, and is consistently ranked one of the world’s most livable cities. However, investment in transit has lagged compared with other North American cities, and congestion is one of the most common complaints of Toronto’s citizens. In addition, transit planning sometimes takes place in isolation from planning for the built form and public realm. To combat this issue, a series of transit projects have been initiated in the Greater Toronto Region, with the Crosstown LRT being one of the first.

This study, and its timely completion, ensured that the detailed design and construction of the LRT along one of Toronto’s busiest and most important arterial roads takes place in concert with intensification of a variety of built forms providing housing choice, new spaces for work and play, new open spaces, connections to Toronto’s spectacular ravines, and a new variety of uses in close proximity to LRT - as well as expanded, safer and more comfortable ways to reach all of these by foot, bicycle, vehicle and transit.

As the City of Toronto and neighbouring municipalities embark upon planning for several new higher order transit corridors, this study offers a precedent for collaboration and integrated consideration of all aspects of urban life, including the impact of new higher order transit. Lessons learned included the following:

• Early and ongoing engagement with a range of stakeholders generated broad-based support for the best solution. In total, more than 5,000 residents were engaged in over 60 public engagement events. Specific, targeted sessions brought together groups with diverging interests, such as cycling advocates and local business associations. These sessions resulted in both groups gaining a better understanding of the trade-offs involved in decision making and ultimately built consensus.

• Extensive testing of built form options generated support for as-of-right zoning, a first in Toronto for mid-rise buildings on a corridor-wide scale. This updated zoning removes a major hurdle for developers that has thus far stunted mid-rise intensification on Toronto’s corridors.

• The benefits of a large scale map illustrating all recommendations allowed the public, stakeholders and City staff to use a common format to discuss recommendations - from the highest level to the smallest details. This map helped to quell public fears of wholesale change on the corridor and also gave confidence to the development community about the future vision.

• Construction of major transit infrastructure in an already dense and developed urban corridor is a significant challenge. Completion of this study prior to LRT construction means that the Vision and study recommendations are enshrined within the design specifications for the LRT. Including these recommendations ensures that improvements to the public realm, utilities/services and streetscapes will be completed at the same time as LRT construction, where possible, resulting in cost savings and reduced impacts on local communities, businesses and commuters. In addition, updated zoning recognizes the need, and the demand, for intensification along with new services and facilities to meet the needs of a growing population.
Eglinton Connects was an intensively collaborative process, involving a wide range of stakeholders. More than 5,000 members of the public participated in workshops, surveys, and public meetings enabling a robust and innovative Vision for the future to emerge. The complexity of the study was compounded by the substantially large Study area itself, with 34 km of building frontage on the Avenue. The 19-kilometre long corridor passes through 12 City wards, each with very different characteristics and political priorities. Given the scale of transformation initiated by the project, an unprecedented level of engagement and consultation with councilors, constituents and other agencies had to be undertaken. As the basis for this work, it was important to develop a clear and organized methodology grounded in extensive background research and a thorough understanding of the corridor through history.

The study itself consisted of four major phases; Visioning and Background Research, Testing of Preliminary Concepts, Testing of Options, and Preferred Options and Implementation. The first phase focused on detailed background research and analysis of historical evolution and existing conditions. This phase culminated in a background report that reviewed the history and character of the corridor and its neighbourhoods, current demographics and opportunities and challenges related to vehicular and active transportation, urban form and built heritage, natural spaces, ravines and parks, and jobs and housing. Later phases drew on this accumulated knowledge of the corridor to build on existing strengths and resolve challenges.

The complexity of the study and its goals quickly called for organizing framework. Key study elements were organized into three main themes; Travelling Eglinton (considering pedestrian, cycling, transit and vehicular movement), Building Eglinton (considering built heritage, development potential, diversity of land uses and building form) and Greening Eglinton (considering opportunities for new open spaces, streetscapes, trees, landscaping, and connections to the City’s ravines and parks). The articulation of these themes provided clarity of communication, discussion and concept development, while also ensuring that varied elements of the corridor were considered in an integrated manner.

Through the testing phases, the team worked with agreed upon principles, which became the 21 key recommendations, such as the concept of multi-modal transportation and mid-rise intensification. These recommendations were applied block by block and property by property. This resulted in a highly varied application of consistent recommendations that responded to specific lot, environmental and neighbourhood conditions.

At each phase, a round of public consultation consisting of in-person meetings and online surveys was used to share study outcomes, garner feedback and determine the breadth and depth of support for proposals.

“As cyclists, we are especially excited by the streetscape recommendations produced in the study, including safe protected bike lanes separated from auto traffic... These plans will ensure Eglinton will become a safe complete street, accessible users of all ages and abilities, and will also ensure the streetscape will contribute to a vibrant and thriving social and commercial environment.”

- Cycle Toronto, Toronto’s largest cycling advocacy organization
Eglinton Connects set out to create a plan for Eglinton Avenue that would achieve the following Vision:

Eglinton will become Toronto’s central east-west avenue – a green, beautiful linear space that supports residential living, employment, retail and public uses in a setting of community vibrancy. Its design will balance all forms of mobility and connect neighbourhoods and natural valley systems to the larger city and the region.

Eglinton Avenue is a very significant corridor for the City of Toronto – it connects the entire City, from east to west, providing a link with neighbouring municipalities, three major subway lines, two highways, numerous open spaces, two major ravines, many distinct communities, and almost every form of urbanism found in Toronto. It also hosts many businesses, homes, office buildings, institutional buildings and civic destinations. The Study recognizes the need to preserve the natural, cultural and built elements of Eglinton that make it unique, while planning for long-term growth that promotes environmental sustainability and the highest quality of life.

To this end, its outcomes include:

- A redesigned roadway that promotes a mobility balance - by reducing the amount of space devoted to cars, while maintaining required levels of service, providing Toronto’s first cross-city bicycle lane (which is also one of Toronto’s first fully protected bike lanes) and wider sidewalks with generous pedestrian amenities in busier areas. It will be implemented in coordination with Metrolinx through construction of the LRT.
- A streetscape and public realm plan that is both recognizable as part of this Corridor, and yet distinct in its treatment as it passes through residential, naturalized, mixed-use, high density and industrial landscapes - as well as Canada’s first green trackway where the LRT runs at-grade.
- A built form plan, with new as-of-right zoning for mid-rise buildings that is the most comprehensive realization of the City’s aim to provide for appropriate intensification on its Main Streets and highest densities and mix of uses closest to 25 new LRT stations. Zoning and Official Plan updates have already been adopted by City Council.
- An open space plan that identifies upwards of 50 acres for new park spaces, 26 new trail connections or gateways to existing trails, enhancements to existing parks and new civic plazas at the LRT stations.
- Demonstration plans for 6 Focus Areas, larger collections of sites that are underutilized or vacant, along with a plan for further detailed study.
- Fulfillment of an advisory role to Metrolinx, which is responsible for building the LRT itself to ensure that stations and LRT infrastructure will support the Vision for the corridor.

**CLARITY OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

Eglinton Connects set out to create a plan for Eglinton Avenue that would achieve the following Vision:

- A vegetated trackway, continuous, protected bicycle lanes, wide sidewalks with pedestrian amenities, mid-rise mixed-use street frontage - all contributing to a comfortable and vibrant sense of place in an area that is currently a big box retail and industrial area dominated by surface parking and vehicle movement.
IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of Eglinton Connects will take place over decades, and will involve both public and private actions. The Study sets out a plan by which implementation will take place according to the Vision, identifying certain short-term actions by the City and other public bodies, such as Metrolinx, to spark redevelopment and to set the stage for private development and long-term change.

One of the most important implementation mechanisms that results from the timing of this study is that reconstruction of the roadway and streetscape according to the Streetscape Plan near the LRT stations will occur in conjunction with station area construction. Reconstruction between the stations will take place incrementally, as road work takes place or development occurs. In the meantime, interim conditions to create a cohesive public realm as much as possible, are identified in the Implementation Plan. Part of this will be undertaken with the City’s ‘Public Realm Amount’, a fund that is set aside for streetscape and public realm improvements.

Updates to the Official Plan and Zoning By-Law are key to beginning to realize the Eglinton Connects Plan, and were adopted by City Council in the summer of 2014. Following this, property redevelopment will depend on the private market, but will be guided through the Development Review/Site Plan Control process. Private developers will, in some cases, be required to contribute to the enhancement of the public realm and streetscape according to the Eglinton Connects Plan.

Other implementation measures, such as burying or relocating hydro infrastructure and development of parks and other community facilities, will require coordination between City divisions and agencies, prioritization within capital budgets and collaboration with developers, property owners, Business Improvement Associations (BIAs) and other stakeholders. In addition, although the Eglinton Connects Plan identifies many concrete recommendations, it also identifies areas for further study where recommendations are not yet clear. These studies will be integrated in planning budgets for future years.

Finally, the study has placed priority on monitoring. Successful implementation of any plan can only be understood if it is measured. The implementation of the Eglinton Connects Plan should be monitored both as a tool to review its success and also as a means to recommend adaptations to the Plan over time. Monitoring of a series of indicators measuring transportation, modal split, new development take-up, green indices, demographics and other factors will allow the City to better understand the impact of the city-building initiatives and their potential application for other transit corridors. These are tools that will support evidence-based planning and policy-making decisions for forthcoming transit and urban design master plans.

OVERALL PRESENTATION

Principles for communication and presentation identified early in Eglinton Connects included clarity, accountability, openness and flexibility. This Study sought to gain participation from the broadest range of participants possible – achieving this goal requires clarity of presentation and accommodation of interests, schedules, and time available. Some participants are interested in only a brief snapshot of the overall study, while others want to dive deep into detail. Eglinton Connects sought to provide clear information and opportunity to participate for this entire spectrum.

The development of three overall themes (Travelling, Building and Greening) provided a popular and effective mechanism for communicating the overall concepts in the study. These three themes were easily understood, discussed and shared, and provided a framework within which to understand the comprehensive nature of the study. This framework was reflected throughout the Study, which grouped the 21 key recommendations under the three themes.

At the same time, as final recommendations emerged, each one was described simply in the final report and illustrated in mapping at a range of scales. Those who were interested could delve into the detail of proposed road cross sections, street tree plantings or permitted building heights, for example. Visual materials ranged from high level conceptual mapping to a detailed 1:500 scale map of the entire 19 km corridor available online and in physical form at consultation sessions. This ‘Mega Map’, as it came to be known (shown to the right), proved very popular with those who wished to understand what recommendations were being made in their specific neighbourhood or intersection. The large size allowed people to draw revisions, make comments and imagine the impact on the real street.

Those interested in simply understanding the application of the broad recommendations or themes, however, could refer to corridor-scale maps and illustrations instead. A 3D model of the corridor and adjacent neighbourhoods also facilitated communication and quick understanding of the integrated nature of the recommendations. By the study’s end, the model illustrated recommended zoning in the form of mid-rise building envelopes, as well as the recommendation road layout and streetscape plan.

Above: The “Mega-Map” - illustrating all recommendations in one 1:500 scale map
An extensive engagement process that drew planners, politicians, developers, business association leaders, cycling advocacy organizations, students and neighbours together generated broad-based support for the plan, which had 21 key recommendations, and specific implementation details for the entire 19 km long corridor. A project of this scale and significance requires a robust and comprehensive engagement plan. In total, over 5,000 people were engaged in over 60 public and stakeholder consultation events and 5 online surveys over the 2 year study period.

The public engagement strategy consisted of two distinct but mutually supportive elements, seeking to generate depth of feedback and breadth of feedback. To elicit depth of feedback, at each phase of the study, three identical workshops were held in three different locations in the study area. This allowed people living and working in different areas, or with different schedules, to attend a meeting at their convenience. It also ensured that larger numbers of people could be accommodated in three venues. Over the course of the study, a meeting was held in each of the 12 Wards that the Crosstown LRT crosses. At each of the meetings, a brief presentation was followed by interactive workshops covering the main themes of the study; Building, Travelling and Greening Eglinton. These workshops sought to provide the time and small group attention that was required to allow people to engage in meaningful and detailed discussion about proposed recommendations.

Complementing these in-person events was an online survey in the two to three weeks following the workshop. While the surveys could not capture the same level of detailed feedback as the in-person workshops, questions covered the same topics and concepts, and reached a broader segment of the population. In total, more than 4,000 survey responses were received, providing the team with a better sense of the breadth of support for various ideas.

The project team also engaged in a targeted approach towards stakeholder engagement that focused on resolution of challenges and developing consensus by bringing groups with diverging interests or opinions together. It also focused effort on reaching a wide group of local business owners and advocates, as this is a critical group that will be impacted by LRT construction and evolution, and also contributes significantly to vibrancy along the corridor. One of the most effective examples was a series of meetings held jointly with BIAs and cycling advocacy organizations. These two groups had some diverging interests in terms of cycling infrastructure and parking provision, but through a series of joint workshops, came to a mutually supported solution that accommodates both cycling and on-street parking.
SUSTAINABILITY

Eglinton Connects is a comprehensive plan for development in one of the most significant corridors of the City that seeks to enhance the diversity and sustainability of urban life and financial investments. New higher order transit infrastructure presents the opportunity to shift the mobility mix towards active transportation and transit ridership. The Eglinton Connects Plan takes advantage of the opportunity to re-balance the roadway and transform what is primarily thoroughfare for private vehicles into a multi-modal street that serves a wide variety of users. It also updates zoning to provide opportunity for mixed-use intensification in a highly transit and pedestrian accessible location and includes what will be the longest linear east-west bike corridor in the City, consisting of protected bike lanes that are separated from vehicular traffic.

In addition to these elements, the Plan focuses on:

- A healthy mix of uses in buildings and neighbourhoods - including diverse residential units types (ranging from townhouses to bachelor and multi-bedroom units) and tenures
- Significant enhancements to pedestrian space, widened sidewalks and stronger bike and pedestrian connections to transit, trails and major destinations
- Protection of Eglinton’s much-loved local business environment and main street feel, including guidelines that call for inclusion of smaller shop formats and diverse uses, maintenance of on-street parking and additional pedestrian and cycling space in shopping areas
- Upwards of 50 acres of new open space, and enhancements to existing open spaces. This provides a critical amenity to new and existing residents, employees and visitors, and also plays a critical role in meeting goals to improve stormwater management, UV protection, clean air and the urban heat island.
- Permeable materials within the LRT infrastructure, including a planted trackway where the LRT runs at-grade and plazas with landscaping at LRT stations
- Identified locations for new trees and landscaping adding up to approximately a 1,200% increase in the tree canopy of the street

Coordinated planning that considers a complementary built form, streetscape and transportation plan contributes to financial and economic sustainability. It creates a corridor that promotes transit ridership and creates significant new opportunities for investment in an already built up area. The timely completion of the study also means that improvements to the roadway and streetscape identified through Eglinton Connects will be completed in tandem with construction of the LRT, and that planned infrastructure and servicing improvements will keep pace with anticipated development and population growth.

“...[The Planning Team] reached out to local residents and stakeholders, to be direct participants in all the deliberations that generated a ‘complete street’ vision...[it united] a sea of competing and conflicting interests behind a future for Eglinton that everyone could support and look forward to...the recommendations identified in the Eglinton Connects Plan are realistic, implementable and forward looking.”

- Eglinton Way Business Improvement Association Executive Director

Transformation of the Corridor along one of Toronto’s most important natural landscapes, the Don Valley Ravine, today (top) and with new cycling, pedestrian and LRT connections to the ravine and its associated parks (bottom)