

Re-imagining Yonge Street

Crucial council vote on transforming Yonge St. set for Feb. 2

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YongeTOMorrow is an initiative focused on revamping the major arterial route of Toronto - specifically Yonge St. PHOTO: NORM LI, CENTRECOURT

Everyone knows about Yonge Street — not only as a place to gather — but with the proliferation of condos along the street and nearby, it's also become a highly desirable place to live.

The pandemic may have slowed things down for now but with the boom in development and the high volumes of pedestrian activity expected to return, the City continues to look at ways to increase pedestrian space and to improve the way people move through and experience it.

Pandemic or not, a movement to modernize the area continues. Toronto city councillors will decide on Tuesday whether to keep a segment of Yonge St. mired in the past or put steps in motion that will result in a complete makeover.

The vote itself revolves around a new watermain construction project between College/ Carleton St. and Queen St. and a far more important accompanying endeavor that will see the number of traffic lanes reduced from four to two in order to expand sidewalk space.

The project, known as yongeTOMorrow received approval this month from the city's infrastructure and environment committee, which set the stage for this week's vote.

Toronto Centre Councillor Krystyn Wong-Tam said she is cautiously optimistic about an initiative she has been fighting for since shortly after she was first elected in 2010 will be approved.

"You never know what happens on the floor of council, but we have been receiving a lot of positive feedback from councillors. We have not heard of any major objections. The majority of it has been overwhelmingly positive."

Wong-Tam added that the "sidewalk conditions of Yonge St. especially the downtown portion that is under review are woefully inadequate. City staff have on multiple occasions and in multiple ways stated that this work cannot be deferred because it is tied to the critical infrastructure replacement of the watermains."

A staff report endorsed in December indicated that Yonge St. has been struggling to serve the growing pedestrian demand, which is a result of more people living and working downtown.

The area, It added, lacks space for "seating, sidewalk cafes and plantings which support enjoyment of the street as a destination. "With a limited right-of-way of 20 metres there are many demands being placed on the street by people walking, cycling, and driving. Prioritization and management of the interactions between all modes is critical. Consideration must also be given to the operation of surface transit, as well as curbside activities like deliveries and ride hailing which support the local economy."

Wong-Tam, meanwhile, said that with the downtown population expected to double by 2041, the sidewalk and the configuration of the street, "which was last designed in the 1950s is not going to serve the 21st century needs of Toronto."

The overall plan, which has been largely supported by area residents, is expected to cost \$70.5 million, which includes the replacement of a cast iron watermain running between Carleton and Queen built in 1889. Construction would take three years and be completed by 2025.

"In order for us to make sure that we can package the master design with the watermain construction into one big tender, we have to make some decisions now," said Wong-Tam. "If we don't do that in a timely fashion and council dithers or decides to defer the decision, it will be a mistake with a heavy price tag."

Defining it as the "first phase of work," the second phase will involve a "flip" of the project north from College/Carleton to Davenport Rd., she said.

"That is what is at stake. If city council is not visionary enough to reach for the future with this new design, they will not only slow down this section of Yonge St. they are going to slow down and delay the next section. We will have an entirely modern Yonge

St. by the time we are finished. Utility relocation, new lighting, landscaping and watermain renewal.”

Among the supporters is Mitch Gascoyne, vice president of development for CentreCourt, a real estate developer that has built a number of high-rise structures on or near Yonge St. in the downtown core.

With 12 projects in various phases of development, its most recent will be located at the northwest corner of Yonge and Wellesley when it launches this year.

Known as 8 Wellesley Residences, plans call for the 55-storey structure to contain 600 units.

YongeTOmorrow, said Gascoyne, will be good for the city, good for the people who live nearby and good for business.

“As a result of the pandemic, people are realizing that the city and the way we experience urban spaces has changed,” he said. “The idea of a restaurant being supported by a grand pedestrian way is far more attractive than a restaurant that doesn’t have an area for patio space.

“More foot traffic up and down Yonge with wider sidewalks is only going to be better in a post pandemic world.”

It’s hard to imagine what life will look like post COVID, but urban planners say the demand for vibrant urban spaces will be higher than ever.