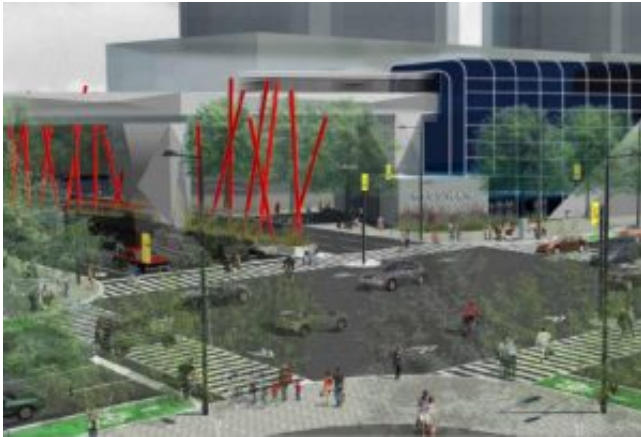


City reimagining Scarborough as an ‘urban village’

Scarborough’s McCowan precinct has long been a swath of commercial buildings, but the city has a plan to turn it into an urban destination.



CITY OF TORONTO ART

An artist's rendering of a vision of a transit gateway to turn McCowan precinct into an urban oasis in Scarborough.

By: [Jennifer Pagliaro](#) City Hall reporter, Published on Mon Jun 23 2014

Standing atop an elevated park, looking out at condos, stretches of green space and retail shops, a piece of Scarborough could one day fool you for a stretch of Manhattan.

If all goes to plan, the council-approved vision for McCowan precinct — now a swath of vacant lots, commercial warehouses and office complexes just south of Hwy. 401 — will create a beautified gateway to Scarborough and be a draw for much-needed development in the area.

It’s the kind of urban oasis that has been spawned by the promise of a subway that would spur development and connect the community anew to the downtown core.

As part of the plan — which acts as a blueprint for all future development and took three years to get final approval at council last week — there is a new school, five-acre park with sports field, hundreds of condo units, bike lanes and a new streetscape that caters to pedestrian and cycling traffic in the works.

Councillor [Glenn De Baeremaeker](#) said the growth in his community is just beginning, having lagged behind the downtown core and North York.

“The reality is without the subway, consumers just say, ‘Well, why should I live way out at McCowan and 401?’ There is a geographic reality. That means Scarborough has developed last,” De Baeremaeker said.

But with the downtown core and closer suburbs reaching a “saturation point” and the promise of a Scarborough subway 10 years in the making, he said the turning point is now.

There are already some 4,200 units planned in all of Scarborough Centre, with applications for 2,300 more units on the go. In the McCowan precinct — an area the size of the downtown core bordered by Hwy 401 and Ellesmere Rd. to the north and south and Bellamy Rd. North and McCowan Rd. to the east and west — there are 1,600 approved units and 1,500 more units at the application stage. With the number of residents in central Scarborough set to grow by 10,000 in the next decade, De Baeremaeker said there is an opportunity to recreate a new “urban village.”

“Our job now is to plan for that tidal wave of growth,” he said. “Scarborough, I think, is next in line.”

With further study, the McCowan district could become not only a draw for new business and residents, but for tourists. Staff is currently studying the possibility of converting the Scarborough RT into a type of High Line Park — an elevated, linear park in New York City using old rail infrastructure. A study on whether it is feasible will be out next year.

“This is really about taking a place that doesn’t have a strong sense of identity and creating a really strong sense of identity by giving it a character,” said the city’s chief planner Jennifer Keesmaat. “People in Scarborough very much desire to have that hub.”

Keesmaat explained their plan is an investment by the city to attract that development to the area, laying down roots — parks, roads and public spaces — that make it an attractive place to build.

“What we’re trying to do is create the winning conditions that will inspire reinvestment in this area,” she said.

Staff has also studied the possibility for a nearly two-acre deck park that would span the width of McCowan Rd. — calling it feasible, but putting the total estimated price tag at \$69 million.

New transit to the area — whether it’s a subway, as approved last year by council or light rail, as previously planned and now part of some mayoral candidate’s platforms — is crucial for development as condo towers holding hundreds of new units are on their way up, city planners say.

A city-initiated study on transit for the precinct in 2011 showed 4,600 daily riders using the existing McCowan RT station, which is in the southwest corner of the precinct.

Planners say their vision doesn’t hinge on what type of transit, just that a station in that region become a “gateway” to the community.

“Whether it’s an RT located at that site or it’s a subway station, it should continue as a main focal point,” Crooks said.

In the 1950s and ’60s, when it was mostly farmland, the area was built using a typical grid style of major arterial roads that only catered to cars. The space in between was expected to just fill up, said senior city planner Russell Crooks.

But that process of development has been slow in the area, which has still-vacant lots between lowrise industrial compounds. In the ’90s, housing developments began to creep in. But without connecting

streets spanning large blocks, development has stalled. In 2005, the city adopted a plan to redesign Scarborough Centre precinct by precinct.

“What’s lacking in the area is the ability to walk along the street and drop off your dry cleaning as you’re walking to the subway. There’s not as much of that. Or grabbing a coffee,” said Crooks. “One of the things people say about this area is its very cold . . . We’re trying to create more of an intimate space.”

The first step is building out a network of new public roads, making it easier to get around by car, on foot or on new cycling lanes.

Since the '90s, the population along McCowan Rd. has grown significantly, according to studies citing census data. There was a 38 per cent increase between 2001 and 2006, while the city’s population grew only 9 per cent, leaving the area with 7,371 residents. More than half of all residents are newcomers and a higher percentage are young adults and young children.

For long-term residents who swarm a central FreshCo grocery store across from the Scarborough Town Centre and just below several new condos, this place has always been a cheap and beautiful alternative to living downtown.

“This is a good an area as any,” says Joseph Cachia, who has been here since 1969. When his children were looking to lay down roots, they also settled in Scarborough for the price.

But little has changed as the community expands and residents are hungry for a faster way to get downtown for the weekend or catch an afternoon baseball game.

A subway would be a welcome addition to the neighbourhood, said Patty Rodgers-Deeks, who has called Scarborough home since 1999.

But many here, who gather around to nab a \$1.97 bag of dark red cherries, are satisfied with their surrounding amenities. It’s hard to picture the street-side amenities the city has dreamed up in a place that has stayed the same for so long.

De Baeremaeker said he hopes the “wild success” of downtown Toronto can be replicated further north — by creating that urban village worth eating, playing and staying in.

“This is not the place that you would take somebody on your first date,” the councillor said of the Scarborough he knows. He’s hoping the Scarborough we don’t know is not long off.