ULI Toronto Blog

The many hands in John Street's rebirth

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By Brandon G. Donnelly

Sometime this fall, the Rockport Group is expected to file a development application

for a new mixed-use project at **22 John Street** in the community of Weston in Toronto. The proposal is expected to include a community/cultural centre, affordable artist spaces, an outdoor area for a farmer's market, and a purpose-built rental apartment building containing approximately 300 units. The project is a partnership between the Rockport Group, Woodburn Capital (who own an adjacent apartment building), the vendor Toronto Parking Authority (TPA), and Artscape, and all signs point to the fact that it will be a welcome addition to the community.

But what some of you may not be aware of, is all the work that's gone into getting this project off the ground. For more than five years, the community has been vocal about the need for revitalization in this part of Weston. That's how long these city building initiatives can take.

So we thought it would be worthwhile to look back and the events leading up to this application, including the involvement that the Urban Land Institute had at the very beginning of this process.

Encouraged by transit investments being made by Metrolinx (a new rail station at Weston to service the Union Pearson Express rail line, along with enhanced GO Train service), ULI approached Councillor Frances Nunziata, the City Planning Division, and the Tower Renewal Office to encourage a design charrette in the Weston neighbourhood. The charrette, led by the City's Urban Design Group (in conjunction with ULI Toronto and Metrolinx), was held in May, 2011. The overall

goal of the initiative was "to provide inspiration for how the Village of Weston may position itself to grow and thrive over the next decade."

Ultimately, the charrette was a collaboration between the City of Toronto, Metrolinx, and ULI Toronto, and the goal was to get on-the-ground feedback from the many diverse communities in the Weston Village community. It was a true bottom-up approach.

Following this design charrette, ULI Toronto's very first Technical Assistance Panel (TAP) was setup. TAPs are part of ULI's larger Advisory Services program and they involve members coming together to address specific land use challenges requiring local knowledge and experience.

In this instance, the TAP was organized to specifically examine the economic feasibility of the proposals that came out of the Weston 2021 design charrette. After all, charrettes are a great exercise, but they're far more powerful when they can actually be implemented. [If you'd like to see the final TAPS report, you can **click here**.]

The Technical Assistance Panel concluded that the Metrolinx transit investments alone would not be enough to attract significant development activity in Weston. They suggested that Weston had great potential in the coming decades, however, the community needed to do some work on their own, in the meantime, to improve the community's image. They recommended a series of Cl's or Community Initiatives: grass-roots programs aimed at specific areas within Weston. Key among them was the following:

- Putting in place a marketing campaign that emphasizes "17 minutes to downtown" from GO Weston, the Farmers' Market, the Humber Valley bike trail and its access to Lake Ontario and the heritage architecture of the surrounding residential neighbourhoods;
- improving community safety, for example through a Toronto Anti-Violence Intervention Strategy (TAVIS);
- improving connectivity between the John Street bridge and Lawrence Avenue bridge, and other streets, as well as improving Main Street itself by improving the retail mix, improving window displays and commercial building façade, setting up patios, and so on;
- setting up lively programming of public spaces, such as expanding or moving the Farmers' Market, creating an outdoor movie theatre;
- and finally, using incentives to help boost development, such as waiving development charges, land transfer tax, and/ or park land levy requirements.

Following the recommendations of the TAP Report, ULI Toronto, the city, and Metrolinx submitted their plan — called the *John Street Revitalization/Streetscape Plan* — to the Urban Land Institute for an "Urban Innovations Grant." The hope was to secure initial seed funding and kick-start the revitalization of Old Weston Village.

In December 2011, the plan was awarded \$23,750. When combined with contributions from the other partners on the project, the total funding was expected to be between \$75,000 and \$85,000. The hope was to use this money to get a public-private partnership off the ground.

In March 2012, Toronto City Council adopted a Weston 2021 Revitalization Strategy Report, which, among other things, recommended that Council endorse the revitalization approach that was developed through the design charrette and TAPs program. [If you'd like to dive into this report, you can **do that here**.]

In August 2012, the TPA then issued an "Expression of Interest" for the sale of their property on John Street. Through the EOI, the Rockport Group was selected as the developer and, in December 2013, City Council authorized the sale of 22 John Street. This was done for two reasons: first, to accommodate a new pedestrian bridge over the adjacent rail corridor (which will be home to the new Union Pearson Express train) and, second, to allow for the redevelopment of the surface parking lot.

Fast forward to present day: the Rockport Group is now preparing to make a formal development application to the city for their site on John Street. But while some of you might think of this application as the beginning, the goal of this story is to illustrate that it really isn't — there's a lot more work involved in city building.

Not only does it take time, but it requires the close collaboration of lots of different parties. In this case, it's the city, Metrolinx, ULI Toronto, the community, Artscape, neighbouring landowners, and others. City building, in many ways, is partnership building. And like most things in life, you get out of it what you put in.









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