Toronto Election 2010
Discussion Paper # 9
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Tower Renewal and Transit City
The Cities Centre is a multi-disciplinary research institute established February 2007 in response to one of the five major research priorities defined in the University of Toronto's "Stepping Up" plan. The mandate of the Centre is broad: to encourage and facilitate research, both scholarly and applied, on cities and on a wide range of urban policy issues, both in Canada and abroad, and to provide a gateway for communication between the University and the broader urban community.

Late last year, several of Toronto’s civic leaders met with the Cities Centre to discuss the need for focused debate on strategic issues during the 2010 Municipal Election Campaign. A consensus was reached that the Cities Centre would mobilize academics from the University and other professionals to prepare Discussion Papers on six themes: governance, environment, transportation, housing, finance and equality. These Papers are meant to describe current issues in an objective and apolitical way, and to raise policy options that could spark focused debate among candidates for Mayor and Council in the 2010 Election.

This is the ninth Discussion Paper in the Cities Centre ‘Toronto Election 2010’ series. Its author is Prof. Andre Sorenson, Department of Social Sciences, University of Toronto at Scarborough. The paper is available at http://www.citiescentre.utoronto.ca; paper copies can be obtained by contacting Cities Centre.

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During the second term of Mayor Miller significant progress was made in planning for two potentially transformative projects for the Toronto suburbs, Transit City and the Mayor's Tower Renewal project. While there has been a lot of discussion and rivalry among the various mayoral candidates about the future of public transit in the city, there has been scarcely a word about the equally important Tower Renewal plans, and the potential synergies between these two projects have been largely ignored. This is unfortunate, as these two initiatives together have the potential to be much more than the sum of their parts. Transit City should energise Tower Renewal, and Tower Renewal should focus reinvestment in the suburbs not only on re-skinning buildings and intensification, but also on creating pedestrian realms and land use patterns that feed the logic of a transit oriented city.

The coming transformation of the Toronto suburbs built during the 1960s and 70s is undoubtedly the single greatest opportunity and challenge facing Toronto over the next decades. There is a very real potential to fundamentally remake vast stretches of Scarborough, Etobicoke, and North York into much more livable, vibrant, transit-oriented and walkable places. In this regard Toronto has a much greater opportunity than most other cities in North America, because our inner suburbs are already relatively dense, already have a decent basic transit system with significant ridership levels, have a basic urban form that was designed to accommodate both cars and rapid transit, and are well connected to a vibrant high-density mixed-use transit-oriented core area in the inner city of Toronto. This makes the project of suburban transformation into more livable and more urban places much more possible than in cities like Phoenix, Atlanta, and Houston were the inner city has been in long decline, and transit systems are almost non-existent.

Toronto’s suburbs were carefully planned for relatively high overall densities that would allow travel by both automobile and public transit. But there were two major failures in how we built our suburbs. First, promises of major investments in new rapid transit were repeatedly deferred or cancelled from the days of Bill Davis in the 1970s until the present. Suburbs that were built with population

**The Tower Renewal project and Transit City have greater potential combined than the sum of their parts.**
densities to support high levels of transit use ended up with a sub-
standard transit system. We failed to adequately invest in public 
transit for 30 years, and are now paying the price, as Toronto is now 
judged to have one of the highest levels of automobile congestion in 
North America.

The second problem is that the highest density areas of the suburbs, 
the clusters of high-rise residential towers, were mostly designed 
with the assumption that most people would travel by car. This is not 
surprising, as the transit systems were not built in advance, and most 
people did in fact have to travel by car. The result, however, is that it 
is now often extremely inconvenient and unpleasant to walk around in 
these neighbourhoods, as has been shown so convincingly by Paul 
Hess and Jane Farrow's suburban walkability research. This creates a 
significant problem for improving the public transit system, however, 
as virtually all transit trips begin and end with a pedestrian trip. If 
people can't walk easily and enjoyably from home to the nearest transit 
stop, and from another transit stop to their destination, then the new 
transit lines will not reach their full potential.

That is why it is so important to link these two projects together, 
both conceptually, politically, and in implementation. Fundamental 
 improvement to the livability of Toronto's suburbs must rest on the 
 twin priorities of improvements to public transit, and improvements 
to the public realm and in particular the pedestrian environment. 
We have already achieved a significant head start on both initiatives, 
but they still need to be implemented, and the risk remains that a 
new mayor and council will see them as separate and independent 
projects. So it is worth reviewing the potential synergies between the 
two.

First, it is clear that the Transit City project is tremendously 
important for Tower Renewal. By improving the speed, convenience, 
and comfort of public transit services, and improving connectivity 
to the rest of the city, the Transit City projects will make transit 
ridership a much more attractive option for many trips. This has the 
potential to strongly reinforce local shopping nodes and centres that 
are connected to the transit system, as they will be accessible to more 
people. If you are in a car, it may be just as easy to travel another 10 
minutes to a box store in Vaughan, but if you are on a light rail car you 
are much more likely to want to shop near your regular transit route. 
Improved public transit will also encourage a lot more pedestrians in 
public spaces and on the sidewalks, which will improve the market for
commercial strips along the new transit lines, and will also make the streets more lively, safer, and interesting places to be.

Transit City also promises to accelerate the rate of investment in the Tower Renewal projects, by promising more attractive neighbourhoods, increased property values, greater opportunities for intensification and mixed-use infill projects, and making reinvestment in ageing buildings more attractive.

At the same time, the Tower Renewal projects can potentially be a huge benefit to making the Transit City LRT lines a success. Just building better transit is not enough. It is also essential to carefully plan the intensification of the areas adjacent to and near the new lines, many of which are dominated by the clusters of high-rise residential towers that are the target of the renewal project. Key priorities in areas near the transit lines should be to improve the public realm, especially for pedestrians. Better walkability should be a top priority in planning the tower renewal projects, particularly as this is the part that private investors are least likely to pay enough attention to themselves. Projects also need to be carefully designed to increase the mix of uses near the new transit stops and along the lines with the addition of more shops, community facilities, and space for services such as dentists, health clinics, day-care centres, and other such uses. And tower renewal projects should also contribute to increases in the numbers of households living near the transit lines through intensification, but that intensification needs to be carefully planned to contribute to vitality and livability, not just result in more density.

Toronto's next Mayor should recognize these as the two potentially transformative priorities for Toronto during the next 2 decades. The potential gains are huge, in terms of livability, new investment, environmental improvements, energy saving, reductions of greenhouse gas emissions, and improved accessibility. But it is very unlikely that either the Transit City or the Tower Renewal projects will reach their full potential if they are not thought of as linked projects with important synergies.

This is Toronto's most important opportunity to jump-start the process of transformation of its suburbs into more livable, more energy efficient, more attractive places for the 21st century. We need to hear what the mayoral candidates will do to ensure that they are conceived as a joined-up and integrated program of revitalization and reinvestment.