



Planning South Riverdale

RESULTS OF CONSULTATIONS ABOUT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES WITH MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY MEMBERS

CONDUCTED BY PLANNING SOUTH RIVERDALE

Winter & Spring 2014

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Background:

Planning South Riverdale (PSR) is an independent group whose members (most of whom are volunteers) live and work in South Riverdale. The goal of the group is to promote a healthy, inclusive future for the area, to support the neighbourhood to continue to house, employ and serve a broad mix of people and a broad range of businesses, and to ensure that the people who are often missed in decision-making processes have a say in the changes that are occurring in the neighbourhood.

In June 2013, Toronto City Council directed the City Planning Division to initiate a study of Queen Street East from the railway overpass at Jimmie Simpson Park to Leslie Street. The purpose of the Study is to create urban design guidelines that are consistent with the policies of the Official Plan, support vibrant, high-quality mixed-use development along Queen Street East, and provide direction for future development that will respect the area's built character, taking community objectives into account. The study was specifically directed to address the development of "strategies that help maintain an inclusive, diverse, mixed-income community with affordable homes, shops and local jobs". As part of the City's process, a stakeholder advisory group was established and four community consultation meetings were held to elicit feedback from local residents.

Unfortunately, there are numerous barriers to participation in the community consultation meetings. Community members who are marginalized (for lack of a better term) are not, in the first place, very likely to have access to the particular information sources through which the consultations were publicized. If they do become aware of it, the format and language of such information would be unlikely to encourage their attendance. And should any such person actually make it to one of the consultations, the demographic overwhelmingly represented by the other attendees (middle-class, professional, articulate, confident) would likely present a significant barrier to feeling comfortable to participate. Therefore, in keeping with its goals noted above, PSR decided to undertake a series of focus groups with marginalized community members. The purpose of these focus groups was to gather input similar to that being solicited from those residents who do not face the same barriers to offering their ideas, and present it to those involved in holding the consultations (that is, the consultants, City staff, and the local Councillor).

Method:

It was clear to PSR that the best approach to organizing the focus groups was to work through & with organizations that provide services to marginalized people in the neighbourhood. We further understood that holding focus groups at the site at which people receive services (during already existing meetings when possible) would encourage involvement. Presenting the information and soliciting responses in an accessible manner and allowing for various styles of input would increase comfort levels and yield greater participation and results. Five different service organizations were contacted with requests to hold focus groups with eight different user-groups.

The results of the initial contacts were more challenging than anticipated. Despite PSR members having personal links to staff in the service agencies, prompt responses were not always forthcoming. Some agencies, understandably, had research protocol concerns in order to protect their clients and this involved additional work on PSR's part plus multiple levels of approval. The work involved for agency staff in organizing the focus groups (however minimal) was one more task on their already impossible "to-do" lists, and was undoubtedly not a priority for them. In addition, PSR members conducting the groups also had significant other responsibilities, so did not always follow-up as quickly or thoroughly as might have been desired.

Ultimately, five focus groups were arranged. Each was organized and conducted by a member of PSR with, in some cases, a second member attending to act as recorder. In addition, staff of the service-provider organizations were welcome to be present and some participated by providing language interpretation, refreshments, supporting participants to speak and/or asking questions. This proved to be helpful as the staff members are familiar with their client groups and could encourage attendance and support the safe sharing of ideas. At the beginning of each focus group participants were informed about PSR and its work, the planning study process, and the purpose of the focus group discussion. In addition participants were told they could leave the meeting at any time, and assured that their names would not be recorded and that all information would be collected into one report with no identifiable details. They were also offered additional information about the on-going planning study consultation process.

The set questions asked at each focus group were:

- In your opinion what are the most important positive things about living in this community?
- What things in this community do you think should be improved or changed?
- How do you think the neighbourhood might be made more welcoming?
- What services and stores do you use most in the neighbourhood?
- What kind of stores and services would you like to have that are NOT in the neighbourhood?

(NB: The final 2 questions were asked partially in order to solicit information for a project on Queen St E retail that PSR has also undertaken.)

At the end of each group, participants were thanked for their input, introductory information was re-emphasized, and a promise was made to ensure the agency received a copy of the final report for participants to see if they wished.

Results:

In total, four focus groups were held with 41 different people participating. (The fifth group was arranged but no participants attended.) These comprised a newcomer group (that required interpretation), residents of supportive housing, and residents in in 2 different transitional housing settings. Participants included men and women of varying ages, ethnicities & backgrounds, people new to the area (and sometimes to the country), long-standing residents, parents of young children, and people with disabilities. The input from these diverse individuals and groups was remarkably consistent.

It is important to note that participants were interested and engaged in the focus groups; many commented that they were very pleased to be asked for their input, some suggested all agencies' clients should have the same opportunity, and a couple of people indicated an interest in attending one of the community consultation meetings. In each group, there was lively discussion that sometimes explored areas outside of those prompted by the questions; some groups went longer than the time allotted as participants had so much to say.

For the purposes of this report, the aggregate comments are grouped into two main categories: Community Assets and Community Improvements.

Community Assets:

- There was general agreement among focus group participants that South Riverdale is a welcoming and inclusive neighbourhood where people are generally friendly and accepting of diversity. A number of individuals commented that they did not feel judged in this community (although this was not a universal opinion).
- The presence of support services and community amenities that meet participants' needs (including those of newcomers) was noted. Local social service agencies --South Riverdale Community Health Centre (SRCHC) and Nellie's were particularly mentioned-- were seen to be key assets and are frequently used by respondents. The importance of having access to parks/green spaces, libraries, schools, day cares and churches within walking distance was identified. The community's "harm reduction focus" was also noted positively.
- Pharmacies, banks, medical clinics and other commercial services that are accessible & welcoming to low income people, including Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) clients, were highlighted as very important. Some people noted that if just one of these local services disappears and they therefore have to go out of the neighbourhood to access this amenity, they end up conducting all their business in the more distant area.
- An important asset mentioned many times was the proximity of the neighbourhood to frequent, easy-to-access TTC service (although some respondents indicated that increased service would be helpful). In addition, some residents said that having bicycle lanes was an important feature in the community as they do not own cars and some used bicycles as their main mode of transportation.

Community Improvements:

- All focus groups identified the dramatic increase in the number of expensive shops and restaurants in South Riverdale as an important concern to them. People agreed that there were fewer and fewer places for lower income people to shop. A need for more affordable grocery stores, clothing stores, restaurants and coffee shops was consistently mentioned. As noted above, there seemed to be a trend toward marginalized people having to leave the neighbourhood to get day-to-day needs met.
- Importance was given to the need for affordable housing, a major issue for many respondents. Several people mentioned their concern that South Riverdale is becoming “like Parkdale”. (Increasing numbers of Parkdale’s low-income residents have become displaced as a result of the closure of their building or the deconversion of rooming houses to make way for higher-income homeowners¹.) Some of the focus group participants currently living in transitional housing stated that they want to continue to live in this neighbourhood (where they & their children have been putting down roots) but feel they won’t be able to afford to do so.
- The absence of places where low income people can meet and socialize was identified as limiting opportunities to connect with friends and neighbours. The conversion of a specific parkette to an off-leash dog area and especially the closing of the Coffee Time at Dundas & Broadview were specifically mentioned as losses of community space in which participants felt comfortable to “hang out”.
- Unfortunately, focus group members perceived the neighbourhood as unsupportive to people with disabilities. Poor quality sidewalks with too many obstructions prevent people who use mobility devices from being able to access neighbourhood resources. Increasing the number of services for people with disabilities was also seen as an important improvement that could be made in the community.
- Although parks and green spaces were considered an asset, it was felt that the quality of parks could be improved. Providing more opportunities for young children to play was specifically mentioned as a need. Increasing the number of benches and garbage containers and ensuring enforcement of the no smoking in parks policy were suggested as improvements by various people. More free community activities such as cultural events and celebrations were also recommended.
- A lack of health professionals in South Riverdale who will take ODSP clients was mentioned. (Participants noted that SRCHC provides this service, but that they are at capacity.)
- Additional ideas presented included: more frequent garbage pick-up so the sidewalks would be less cluttered with bins; more bike lanes; more frequent TTC service and better transit shelters; additional amenities for children; and establishing services for transsexual people.
- The need to maintain the welcoming atmosphere and village feel of the neighbourhood was highlighted by many. Examples were cited of expensive housing replacing more modest buildings, with tension developing among the new purchasers and longer-term residents due to differing expectations of appropriate street activities and public behaviors.

¹ Slater, Tom (2005). Toronto’s South Parkdale Neighbourhood: A Brief History of Development, Disinvestment, and Gentrification. *Centre for Urban and Community Studies, Research Bulletin #28*, University of Toronto. Accessed on May 13, 2014 from: <http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/pdfs/researchbulletins/CUCS-RB-28-Slater-Parkd.pdf>

Conclusions:

Marginalized people in S Riverdale welcome the opportunity to participate in community consultations, but these must be accessible (i.e., tailored to their needs) in order to facilitate their involvement. Marginalized people have informed and useful perspectives and ideas to contribute, and their viewpoints should be sought by decision-influencers and makers as actively as those of other community members.

Projects such as this one could be completed more effectively and quickly with dedicated resources to focus fully on the work involved, rather than through volunteer initiatives. But to be successful, the work must be carried out by those who truly understand how to ensure the process is accessible to these community members. In addition, co-operation/collaboration with local service providers is essential for success; the more support they provide, the higher the participation rates.

Recommendations:

In light of the input offered in the focus groups, PSR makes the following recommendations for the current and any future planning studies:

- Genuine efforts should be made to consult with all sectors of the community, not just those who can easily respond to the traditional consultation approaches. The interests of those who are unable to participate in conventional processes should be as equally represented in planning recommendations as those of more influential community members.
- Priority should be given to identifying policies that can help to ensure affordable retail spaces and social services providers remain in the community.
- Policy solutions should be identified to ensure affordable housing is available in the community for a wide mix of residents, including families, elderly people, low-income people, and people with disabilities.
- Various types of public spaces should be developed to meet the needs of diverse community members, particularly considering those with limited private space in which to conduct their social lives.
- Focus should be given to improved accessibility of the neighbourhood, including “walkability” for people using mobility devices.
- Ideas that help maintain the inclusive, “village feel” of the area should be recommended.

PSR thanks:

- The focus group participants who generously shared their opinions and experiences with us;
- The agencies that hosted the groups and the staff members who so ably assisted with them;
- Those who carried out the focus groups on behalf of PSR and gave input to this report: Kristie Daniel, Maggi Redmonds, Rebecca Rogers, Mariana Valverde and Paul Young.

Planning South Riverdale

We are an independent group whose members live and work in South Riverdale; our goal is to promote a healthy, inclusive future for the area. We see the neighbourhood is changing, and we are not afraid of change. But we want this neighbourhood to continue to house, employ and serve a broad mix of people and a broad range of businesses. And we want to make sure that the people who are often missed in decision-making processes have a say in these changes.

Our roles include:

- Sparking conversation about a healthy, inclusive South Riverdale
- Speaking up for inclusion whenever changes are considered
- Promoting community engagement approaches to reach people who are rarely consulted, building on and supporting existing networks wherever possible
- Engaging the broader community in discussions about how local development benefits can be equitably distributed
- Calling upon all public officials to uphold the Official Plan's commitment to "diversity and opportunity"