

MAKING RICHMOND HILL FUTURE-READY



Rob Jowett

The Yonge Street Corridor is set to become the centrepiece of both Richmond Hill and York Region as the city looks to urbanize to accommodate projected population and employment growth and to take advantage of potential transit upgrades being planned by the region and the province.

The **City of Richmond Hill** is currently undertaking a municipal comprehensive review to update its official plan. The city is looking to adjust its policies so that a denser, more urban environment can be built up in its downtown to support transit expansion and to keep up with the evolving demands of a more knowledge-based economy. The city's official plan was first adopted in 2010, and the *Planning Act* requires that official plans be updated 10 years after they are first adopted, and every five years thereafter.

“Our... big goals for the update of the Official Plan are to make Richmond Hill future-ready,” Richmond Hill policy planning director **Patrick Lee** told *NRU*. “What we’re seeing is there’s a lot of technological change and social and demographic change that’ll occur over the coming couple

of decades. And we want to be ready to accommodate that change and utilize that change to improve Richmond Hill as a place to live for its residents.”

York Region is expected to grow to 2.02 million residents and 990,000 jobs by 2051, from just over 1.1 million residents in 2016 and 654,650 jobs in 2019.

Lee says between population and employment increases and the anticipated impacts of new technologies like autonomous vehicles on urban life and planning, Richmond Hill needs to become a denser, more urban city and to get away from its history as a low-density, car-oriented suburb.

The Richmond Hill official plan update project is occurring concurrently with York Region’s municipal comprehensive review, and will therefore be in conformity when both reviews are completed. York Region long-range planning director **Sandra Malcic** told *NRU* that Richmond Hill will play a major role in achieving regional growth objectives, especially along the Yonge Street corridor.

“To prepare for the projected population and employment growth to 2051, it will be critical to

maximize transit investments by prioritizing growth in locations with existing and/or committed infrastructure and to provide a full mix and range of housing options and employment opportunities for residents,” says Malcic. “In recent years, there has been over \$3.7-billion invested in transit infrastructure... [and] additional future transit investment is also planned... These investments will support intensification efforts along centres and corridors, including the Richmond Hill Langstaff Gateway centre.”

Stantec urban places fellow **David Dixon**, who is serving as an advisor for the official plan update, told *NRU* that Richmond Hill needs to evolve to keep up with a changing and evolving economy. He says there is a labour shortage across the developed world as population growth and immigration slow down, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and because most new jobs require higher education, which is not available to everyone.

“Younger folks with education are in short supply,” says Dixon. “Jobs, and the investment that those jobs entail, follow this workforce. And this workforce is

very urban in its housing preferences. It is drawn by walkable, lively, mixed-use, denser centres and corridors, and ... places that are really rich in community and interaction.”

Dixon says cities like Richmond Hill need to focus on building those urban-oriented communities in order to plan for long-term economic growth, both for retaining domestic talent and attracting new workers from across the country and around the world. He says that not all parts of the city will change evenly, and some areas will remain virtually unchanged, while others will experience a lot of growth and intensification very quickly.

“Much of Richmond Hill, will probably look exactly like it does today 20 years from now, in terms of wonderful lawns and houses that people love and single-family neighbourhoods they love,” says Dixon. “[We] can really bring Yonge Street to life in a much more vital and mixed-use and walkable way. [There are] some really exciting opportunities ahead of it in terms of attracting these folks, these jobs, this innovation, without having to

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change a blade of grass on anybody's front yard in one of the more traditional suburban neighbourhoods."

Many of the changes being proposed for the official plan respond to the proposed extension of the Yonge subway line. The Yonge North Subway Extension would add 7.4-kilometres of track to the subway line to the Richmond Hill Centre Terminal and could include up to six stations. The extension was announced by the provincial government in 2019 and has not yet been approved. It is currently anticipated that the project could be completed by 2030.

"It's really [about] taking advantage of the subway, the transit extensions that are coming to Yonge Street, and within a five, maybe 10-minute walk, allowing as much density as you can, and really requiring that this density, support real, vibrant life at street level, including lively public spaces that bring folks together, [and] being mixed-income [neighbourhoods]," says Dixon. "When you do this, you have a fundamental responsibility to make sure there are really great walkable connections, and a sense of stepping down and

respecting the neighbourhoods nearby that are often single-family [detached houses]."

Dixon adds that while the subway has not yet been approved and nothing is guaranteed, the city feels confident that the extension will be confirmed and built. He adds that if it is ultimately not approved, the city's vision for intensifying the Yonge Street corridor will still be viable, but would likely support less growth.

In order to accommodate that more urbanized vision, the allowed heights and densities along the Yonge Street corridor will need to be increased, especially in the areas where subway stations are expected. Permissions along Yonge Street vary, but generally permit between four and 15 storeys in height and a maximum floor space index of three times the site area. Around transit hubs, buildings of up to 40 storeys high and those with a floor space index of up to 6.5 are permitted. Lee says the city is planning a series of public consultations this spring to determine the exact level of intensification that should be permitted, and what other policies are needed to achieve

the city's vision.

Dixon says Richmond Hill needs to ensure that there is enough housing diversity and a sufficient stock of affordable housing to ensure that a diverse community can be created. He says in a lot of quickly-growing areas—especially with advanced technology companies like the ones prevalent in the southern area of **York Region**—highly-paid employees often drive up housing prices and price out lower-income employees.

One of the goals of Richmond Hill's official plan is for at least 35 per cent of new homes in Richmond Hill Centre and in the city's key development areas—around the Yonge Street and 16th Avenue and Yonge and Bernard Street intersections—to be affordable housing, as well as 25 per cent of new homes within the settlement area. Those targets are shared by York Region. Lee says the city has been "challenged" in meeting that goal due to the limited number of legislative

tools it has, and that its forthcoming affordable housing strategy is intended to provide new ways of achieving that goal.

"Richmond Hill has tremendous opportunity ahead of it," says Dixon. "And that's for everybody who lives there. Because one of the things that these corridors and centres are going to do is create more tax revenue to spend on schools and parks and public services across Richmond Hill. And none of this requires changing anything anybody loves about the Richmond Hill they live in today." 🌱



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