

VMC Engagement Summary Report

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PREPARED BY

Christina Bagatavicius
and Michael Esteras of
Bespoke Collective

Bespoke
CULTURAL COLLECTIVE



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Overview of Engagement

The City is undertaking the VMC Parks and Wayfinding Master Plan (VMC PWMP) to prepare and implement the timely development of parks and open space, and a wayfinding strategy in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre (VMC). The City of Vaughan has engaged landscape architects Janet Rosenberg & Studio to develop the masterplan, and Bespoke Collective as sub-consultants to advise on the stakeholder and public engagement plan.

The VMC Engagement Plan was informed by an audit of existing communication material and strategic documents, pre-consultation stakeholder interviews, best practice research, and work sessions with the project team. The plan was also developed in alignment with the City of Vaughan's Covid-19 measures at the time. Throughout the duration and implementation of the engagement plan, in-person public gatherings were not allowed. Due to these circumstances, all engagement touchpoints were hosted or available online.

The engagement plan consists of the following components:

1. ONLINE SURVEY

The public survey aimed to gain an understanding of how residents, visitors, and employees will use future parks and open spaces in the VMC, and what the essential character of these spaces should be.

2. LANDOWNER MEETINGS

Two meetings were held to provide an update to VMC landowners regarding the VMC Secondary Plan Update, the VMC Transportation Master Plan Update, the VMC Functional Servicing Strategy Report, and the VMC Parks and Wayfinding Master Plan.

3. COMMUNITY SESSION

Residents of the Expo condominiums attended a virtual presentation and discussion.

4. FOCUS GROUPS

Two 90-minute Virtual Focus Groups were hosted to provide the public an opportunity to learn more about the VMC Parks and Wayfinding Master Plan, and to obtain public input on key elements of the master plan.

5. HAVE YOUR SAY #1

An interactive webpage titled "Have Your Say" was available to the public to view a virtual presentation and to provide input on key elements of the master plan. The page was developed as an extension of the focus group questionnaire.

6. HAVE YOUR SAY #2

An interactive webpage was created to provide an informational video and an opportunity to provide feedback for members of the public. The video provided an overview of the master plan and an update on the progress of the study to date.

7. STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS

Two City of Vaughan-led meetings were hosted with landowners and residents. The purpose of the meetings was to provide information on the progress of the study to date, an update and overview of the master plan, and an update on the development of signage options.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The VMC public and stakeholder engagement aligns with the City of Vaughan's engagement spectrum, which states the different levels of public participation in the master planning process:

1. SHARE INFORMATION

Provide the necessary context and background information in a timely manner.

2. LISTEN AND LEARN

Participants feel heard and the City understands the community narrative.

3. CONSULT

Citizens are offered a high-level opportunity to contribute.

Prior to public and stakeholder engagement, 14 stakeholders, including Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua, local councillors and City staff, were interviewed to identify opportunities for public consultation, understand potential audiences, and design a plan that is tailored to the present-day context. The following five key actions were identified in the research and development of the engagement plan, and were guideposts for decision-making:

- Launch a public awareness campaign that rallies the public behind a unified vision;
- Engage a wider public and shareback on the community perspective;
- Focus on people who will live, work and commute in the VMC;
- Shift the narrative so that it connects the wider community; and
- Improve accessibility by balancing analogue with digital engagement tactics.

Engagement Reach

The engagement plan aimed to sustain and deepen relationships with stakeholders through their continued involvement in the planning of the VMC. These stakeholders include developers, landowners, planners, City Councillors, local businesses, the architecture and design community, prospective residential and commercial tenants and investors.

The engagement plan also aimed to reach segments of the public who have a vested interest in the VMC and have likely not yet been made aware of the current master planning process. These audiences are defined as members of the public who will live, work, commute, study, play and/or socialize at the VMC. In some instances, these audiences already interact with the VMC on a daily basis (i.e. commuters, students, employees, engaged citizens who are connected with City Councillors). In other instances, these audiences may engage with the VMC in the near future (i.e. soon-to-be residents, sports and recreational groups, frequent users of parks and recreational spaces).

CURRENT STAKEHOLDERS

Developers
Landowners
Planners
Councillors
Local Businesses
Architecture Community
Prospective Residential and Commercial Tenants
Investors

PRIORITY AUDIENCES

Current Residents
Future Residents
Commuters
Workers in the VMC
University Students
Seniors (SAVI group)
Engaged Citizens from Councillor Networks
Sports and Recreation Groups

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In total, over 984 people provided their views and comments via the online survey, focus groups, the “Have Your Say” webpage, and stakeholder meetings. The following are the numbers of participants engaged in public and stakeholder engagement:

984+

Total number of engaged individuals and stakeholders

528

Survey respondents

23

Focus group participants

309

Visitors to the “Have Your Say” page

124

Attendees in the stakeholder meetings

Key Insights

Overall, the public feedback we heard can be encompassed into the following key insights:

1. PARKS AND GREEN SPACES

Generally, participants support the creation of parks and green spaces at the VMC. In the survey, 9 out of 10 respondents cited parks and green spaces as an important factor when considering where to live (Source: Online Survey, Q7).

2. WALKING AND CYCLING

Across all engagement touchpoints, participants expressed strong support for walking and cycling paths or trails at the VMC. This finding is consistent across the survey, focus groups and the “Have Your Say” webpage.

3. CONNECTIVITY

There was a strong demand for safe and accessible paths across the VMC and on regional roads, and connections and signage to major parks and trails such as the Black Creek Parkland. There was also an emphasis on building connectivity through transit-oriented development.

4. FLEXIBLE SPACES

Members of the public expressed a strong preference for flexible and open public spaces in the VMC over programmed spaces. These include, but are not limited to, dog parks, social spaces for gathering, and family-friendly spaces.

5. HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

In the survey, 9 out of 10 respondents believe that health and happiness is an important goal when it comes to the design of parks and open spaces in the VMC (Source: Online Survey, Q8). When asked why parks and open spaces were important, focus group participants’ responses were centered on the themes of physical activity and mental health, as well as access to the outdoors, community and safety (Source: Focus Groups).

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OVERVIEW BY ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINT

OVERVIEW BY ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINT

This section of the report provides an overview and/or key findings of each engagement touchpoint: the online survey, two focus groups, the interactive “Have Your Say” webpage, and two stakeholder meetings.

Online Survey

OVERVIEW

As part of this master planning process, the VMC Parks Survey was developed to gain an understanding of how residents, visitors, and employees will use future parks and open spaces in the VMC, and what the essential character of these spaces should be. The VMC Parks Survey began its fielding period on October 16, 2020 and ended on November 30, 2020. The VMC Parks Survey is a component of a broader public and stakeholder engagement plan, which aims to inform and engage local communities and stakeholders at key moments in the master planning process.

METHODOLOGY

The VMC Parks Survey was produced on SurveyMonkey. The survey consists of 30 questions, including 9 demographic questions. The margin of error is 5% (relative to the 2016 census population of Vaughan).

The target audiences for the survey include current and future residents of the VMC, prospective residents and/or the VMC property buyers, public transit users in the VMC, employees and business owners in or near the VMC, engaged Vaughan citizens, seniors, and recreation and sports associations.

In an effort to reach these audiences, the City of Vaughan has utilized the following:

- Outreach to Mayor, Council, and Senior Leadership Team networks
- Outreach to major landowners, landowner-affiliated resident networks, and partners
- Outreach to sports and social organizations, engaged citizen networks, and seniors groups such as the Seniors Association of Vaughan Initiatives (S.A.V.I.)
- Outreach to students in Niagara University in Ontario
- City of Vaughan website
- Public Service Announcement
- City Update (to all registered citizens)
- Council eNewsletter content and social media
- Social media and paid social promotion

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The VMC Parks Survey has reached 528 respondents out of a population of 306,233 (2016 Census, Statistics Canada). This represents a margin of error of just 4% with a confidence level of 95%. The survey has surpassed the minimum target sample size of 384 (relative to the population figure above).

77% of respondents are current residents of Vaughan (Source: Q2). While the survey reached residents across the five wards of Vaughan, the majority of respondents live in Ward 4 or North Concord/Thornhill (49%; Source: Q23). Respondents also represent a range of users in the VMC, including current residents in the VMC (38%), public transit users in the VMC (20%), and employees in or near the VMC (11%) (Source: Q2).

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OVERVIEW BY ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINT

The largest respondent age group is 25-34 (29%), followed by 35-44 (25%), 45-54 (21%), and 55-64 (10%) (Source: Q24). 32% of respondents have children under the age of 14 in their household (Source: Q26). The survey sample skews younger in comparison to Vaughan population demographics. The sample represents a higher percentage of persons aged 25-34 (29% vs. 11% in the 2016 census) and 35-44 (25% vs. 14%).

10% of respondents sometimes experience mobility issues (Source: Q28), and 4% of respondents identified as a person with a disability (Source: Q27).

CURRENT RESIDENTS IN THE VMC

38% of respondents (n=199) are current residents in the VMC. Among this group, 27% ride public transit in the VMC and 13% work in or near the VMC (Source: Q2). Age demographics are similar to the wider survey sample, as stated above. Only 15% of respondents who live in the VMC have children under the age of 14 in their household (vs. 32% for all respondents; Source: Q26). 54% have two bedrooms in their home (vs. 28%) and 31% have one bedroom or a studio (vs. 16%). For further contrast, only 5% of respondents who live in the VMC have four or more bedrooms in their home, compared to 34%, the top response, for all respondents (Source: Q25).

Please note: The key findings below state if the data collected from respondents who live in the VMC are consistent or significantly deviate from the wider group.

KEY FINDINGS

It is important to note that, at the time of fielding, Vaughan communities have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The collected data may or may not reflect changing attitudes or patterns of usage as it relates to parks and open spaces. The following are the key findings from the VMC Parks Survey:

1. 9 out of 10 respondents cited parks and green spaces as an important factor when considering where to live.

This is followed by convenience of driving and parking (77%), and convenience of public transit and active transportation (69%). This finding is consistent with respondents who live in the VMC, with slightly more importance given to convenience of driving and parking (84%; Source: Q7).

2. 9 out of 10 respondents believe that health and happiness is an important goal when it comes to the design of parks and open spaces in the VMC. This is followed by sustainability and climate resilience (81%), diversity and multiculturalism (49%), and commerce and economic prosperity (46%). This ranking is consistent with respondents who live in the VMC (Source: Q8).
3. 3 out of 4 respondents use parks and open spaces at least once a week. This includes 35% of respondents who use parks and open spaces one to three times per week, 29% who are daily users, and 11% who use parks and open spaces four or more times per week. This finding is consistent with respondents who live in the VMC. It may be important to note that 36% of respondents who live in the VMC are daily users of parks and open spaces (Source: Q2).
4. The top three reasons to visit parks and open spaces are to enjoy physical activity and to be healthy (67%), to disconnect, unwind, and relax (56%), and to connect with nature and

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OVERVIEW BY ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINT

wildlife (56%) (Source: Q4). This top three ranking is consistent with respondents who live in the VMC.

5. 3 out of 4 respondents usually walk to get to a park (Source: Q3). Respondents are also willing to walk for 10 minutes (37%), 15 minutes (34%), or 20 minutes (18%) to a park before deciding to cycle, ride public transit or drive a car (Source: Q10). These findings are consistent with respondents who live in the VMC.
6. To access larger sports fields or courts by car or public transit, respondents are willing to travel less than 15 minutes (30%) or between 15-29 minutes (46%). Only 10% of respondents are willing to travel 30 minutes or more (Source: Q16). This finding is consistent with respondents who live in the VMC.
7. 69% of respondents who live in the VMC cited long distances or time-consuming travel as the top barrier for using parks and open spaces, compared to only 47% for all respondents. This is followed by parks that are in poor condition (42% vs. 30% for all respondents), parks that feel unsafe (20% vs. 15%), and uninteresting facilities in the parks (20% for both groups). Further, when asked to choose barriers, only 7% of respondents who live in the VMC responded with “Nothing. [I am] happy with how often [I] go,” compared to 23% for the overall respondent group (Source: Q6).
8. Respondents were asked if, when walking or cycling, they prefer a shorter route (10 minutes or less) that requires them to cross a busy street, or a longer route (15 minutes or more) that does not require them to cross a busy street. 62% of respondents who live in the VMC prefer the shorter route. In contrast, the wider respondent group is divided between the two opposing responses: 52% prefer the shorter route and 49% prefer the longer route (Source: Q13).
9. The majority of respondents expect access to trails for walking, hiking, cross-country skiing and cycling if they walk to a park nearby (10 minutes or less) (62%; Source: Q11) or at least 20 minutes away (71%; Source: Q12). Similarly, the majority of respondents are also most interested in nature or wildlife walk as a park activity (67%; Source: Q14), and chose running or walking as a recreational activity they or members of their household actively partake in at least once per month during peak season (either summer or winter) (76%; Source: Q15). A walk or hike is also the top activity (51%) that would bring respondents to a park in winter or colder weather, followed by skating (50%; Source: Q17). These findings are consistent with respondents who live in the VMC.
10. Respondents were asked to name their favourite park. The top responses are High Park (~7%), Boyd Conservation Park (~5%), North Maple Regional Park (~3%), G. Ross Lord Park (~2%), Trinity Bellwoods Park (~2%), and Kortright Centre for Conservation (~2%; Source: Q19). Other repeated mentions include Mackenzie Glen District Park, Marita Payne Park, Sonoma Heights Community Park, Richmond Green Sports Centre and Park, Sugarbush Heritage Park, Thornhill Woods Park, Bindertwine Park, Central Park in NYC, and Earl Bales Park.
11. 87% of respondents chose good lighting as a factor to consider when using parks and open spaces in the evening or after dark. This is followed by visibility and open space (62%), active programming and activities in the park (including special events) (44%), and lots of people using it (40%; Source: Q18). This ranking is consistent with respondents who live in the VMC.

SIGNAGE AND WAYFINDING

- I. When in a park, the majority of respondents prefer to have physical signage nearby to learn more about the space around them (e.g. area history, types of plant species, etc.) (63%) and to help orient themselves (61%). Respondents who live in the VMC are more likely to

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OVERVIEW BY ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINT

use their mobile phone to access a map to help orient themselves (48% vs. 36% for all respondents), and to use their mobile phone to access information about the space around them (38% vs. 32%; Source: Q21).

2. Major parks and trails are the most valuable to respondents on a sign in an unfamiliar area (73%). This is followed by major streets and intersections (53%), attractions such as museums and galleries (36%), public transit hub (34%), and large retailers and restaurants (30%). This ranking is more or less consistent with respondents who live in the VMC, with a slightly higher percentage for large retailers and restaurants (36%; Source: Q22).

Landowner Meetings

An update regarding the VMC Secondary Plan Update, the VMC Transportation Master Plan Update, the VMC Functional Servicing Strategy Report, and the VMC Parks and Wayfinding Master Plan was provided to landowners in the VMC on February 4 and February 10, 2021.

Community Session

Over 60 residents of the Expo condominiums attended a virtual presentation and discussion on March 23, 2021. Residents stressed the need for park facilities, including basketball and tennis courts. They also stressed that dogs, and dog facilities are an issue that needs to be resolved and provided for.

Focus Groups

OVERVIEW

Two 90-minute Virtual Focus Groups were hosted on Tuesday, May 4, 2021 and Thursday, May 6, 2021, from 7:00 pm to 8:30 pm, to provide the public an opportunity to learn more about the VMC Parks and Wayfinding Master Plan, and to obtain public input on key elements of the master plan. The events were organized and facilitated by staff from the City of Vaughan VMC Program, Janet Rosenberg & Studio, and Bespoke Collective.

The focus groups were hosted on Zoom Webinar. Members of the public in attendance were able to participate through the built-in chat and Q&A features, and through the interactive tool Mentimeter. Each session provided an introduction, a brief overview of the session, a land acknowledgment, an icebreaker activity with trivia questions on Vaughan, an interactive 45-minute presentation by Janet Rosenberg & Studio, and a 20-minute moderated Q&A session.

OUTREACH AND ATTENDANCE

The focus groups drew in a total of 23 participants: 11 participants joined on May 4, and 12 on May 6. Outreach was conducted with an email campaign via MailChimp. The campaign was intentionally focused on reaching “already engaged” community members. The team used a mailing list of 260 contacts collected from the VMC Parks Survey, which was conducted from October 16, 2020 to November 30, 2020. The campaign was able to generate 69.8% opens, and the conversion rate to attendance is 8.8%. As a benchmark for virtual public consultations in the future, 22 individuals registered for the May 4 focus group, and 23 for May 6. In relation to attendance numbers, the attrition rate of registrants is within the range of 50-57%.

KEY FINDINGS

1. When asked what is the first thing that comes to mind when they think of the VMC, participants were generally excited about the creation of a high density, convenient and

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walkable downtown. Many saw the VMC as a transit hub. However, some associated it as suburban, industrial, and empty; and with traffic and wide intersections. (Source: Q1; n=17)

2. When asked how the program of South Urban Park should differ from North Urban Park, 58% (11) of participants responded that they would like more spaces designed for markets, arts and cultural events, and 37% (7) would like more urban sports facilities (basketball, volleyball, skate park, adult exercise). (n=19)
3. 57% of participants would prioritize maximizing facilities in neighbourhood parks over maximizing green features. 43% would prioritize maximizing green features. (n=21)

4. In establishing parks near the VMC, 90% (19) of participants would prioritize convenient access by walking or cycling over the size of park and the number of facilities (n=21).

Walking and cycling paths or trails are also repeatedly mentioned by participants in open-ended questions. (Source: Q1, Q8-11)

5. When asked if the comfort and safety of a crossing over Highway 407 would affect whether they would walk or cycle to parks and open space south of the VMC, 77% (17) of participants responded “Yes, the more comfortable I feel, the more likely I am to walk or cycle across 407 to go to parks.” 18% (4) responded “No, I am more likely to drive or take transit to any park south of the VMC.” (n=22)
6. 55% (12) of participants would like the storm ponds in the West Environmental Space to be designed with bridges and decks that allow them to get next to the water. 45% (10) would like the storm ponds designed with trails and lookouts. (n=22)
7. When asked how the Millway Promenade should be designed south of Highway 7, 83% (19) of participants preferred it to be designed as an urban promenade, like the original concept. Only 17% (4) preferred it to be designed as a linear green park. (n=23)
8. The following are key themes for what participants found were most important for the VMC parks and open spaces to provide: (Source: Q8; n=22)
 - a. Safety
 - b. Comfort
 - c. Leisure
 - d. Outdoor recreation
 - e. Pedestrian and cycling trails
 - f. Flexible and open green spaces
 - g. Dog parks
 - h. Programmed spaces and amenities
 - i. Social spaces for gathering
 - j. Family-friendly spaces

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9. When asked why these were important, participants' responses were centered on the themes of physical activity and mental health, access to the outdoors, connectivity and transit-oriented development, community and safety. (Source: Q9; n=17)
10. Participants were asked what they thought was missing in the master plan. The following is a list of key themes: (Source: Q10; n=17)
 - a. Connectivity and transit-oriented development
 - b. Bicycle rentals
 - c. Retail, food, entertainment and leisure
 - d. Trails and green spaces
 - e. Less or no parking
 - f. Parking
11. Participants were asked what they were more excited by when it comes to the transformation underway in the VMC. Participants were excited about the creation of a downtown corridor, green spaces, connectivity, accessibility, walkability, and spaces for retail, food and dining, outdoor activities and entertainment. (Source: Q11; n=17)

Have Your Say #1

From May 17 to July 1, 2021, an interactive webpage titled “Have Your Say” was available for the public to view a virtual presentation and to provide public input on key elements of the master plan. The webpage was developed as an extension of the focus group questionnaire. The page received a total of 186 visits and 131 contributions. The survey tool within the webpage was completed by 119 respondents. The largest survey respondent age group is 25-34 (37%), followed by 35-44 (26.1%) and 18-24 (15.1%). 50.4% of respondents are female, and 47.1% are male.

KEY FINDINGS

1. 80.7% of respondents believed that the design, features and facilities within the South Urban Park should differ from North Urban Park. 41.2% stated that the South Urban Park should have more spaces for markets, arts and cultural events, and 39.5% stated that it should have more sports facilities (e.g. for basketball, volleyball, skate park, adult exercise). 19.3% believed that it shouldn't differ, and liked the emphasis on leisure and flexible park spaces in North Urban Park (n=119).
2. When asked which approach they would take in designing neighbourhood parks in the VMC, 64.7% of respondents would prioritize green features over facilities (n=119).
3. When asked what matters the most in establishing parks close to the VMC, 68.9% of respondents would prioritize convenient access by walking or cycling over the size of the park and number of facilities available (n=119).
4. When asked how important are separated cycling and pedestrian facilities on the Jane Street Bridge to your choice to walk or cycle to parks and open space south of the VMC, 59.7% of respondents believed that is very important, and that they will only feel comfortable walking or cycling over the bridge if physically separated from traffic. 22.7% believed that is somewhat important—physical separation is ideal, but would feel comfortable using a standard sidewalk or bike lane (n=119).
5. When asked how the City should design the environmental open spaces and stormwater ponds on the western side of the VMC, 68.9% of respondents expressed the need for trails and lookouts over bridges and decks that allow them to get next to the water (n=119).

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OVERVIEW BY ENGAGEMENT TOUCHPOINT

6. 64.7% of respondents would prefer to see Millway, south of Highway 7, designed as an urban promenade with a paved walkway and adjacent cafes and retail, like the original concept, over a linear green park with more planting, trees and green features, and retail and cafes further away (n=119).
7. When asked what are the most important things that parks and open space in the VMC must provide, respondents offered the following (n=5):
 - a. Trails for walking, running and cycling
 - b. Outdoor gathering spaces (i.e. plaza/square, dog parks, seating, picnic areas, restaurants, patios, cafés, food trucks, shops, bars, markets, vendors)
 - c. Outdoor sport and recreation (i.e. swimming, tennis, soccer, baseball, cricket, pickleball)
 - d. Arts and culture (i.e. entertainment, live performances, music, festivals)
 - e. Washrooms and sanitation areas
 - f. Physical separation between walking/cycling paths and road traffic

Have Your Say #2

From November 16 to December 11, 2021, a second interactive webpage titled “Have Your Say” was available for the public to view an informational video and provide feedback. The video provided an overview of the master plan and an update on the progress of the study to date. The page received a total of 145 visits from 123 unique visitors, and four comments. As well, the YouTube presentation received a total of 141 views. The following is a summary of public feedback on the page:

1. One visitor expressed a need for an accessible ramp and stairs structure at the east end of the VMC along Exchange Avenue for safe access to Jane Street and the Highway 407 TTC station.
2. One visitor expressed a need for a bike lane on Millway Avenue, Jane Street south of Highway 7, or any other path connecting to the Black Creek Parkland.
3. One visitor expressed support for green and public spaces at the VMC, and requested a view or a 3D walk-through of pedestrian sidewalks, bike lanes and public transit at the VMC.

Stakeholder Meetings

Two City of Vaughan-led meetings with landowners and residents were hosted on March 3, 2022. The presentation during the meeting provided information on the progress of the study to date, an update and overview of the master plan, and an update on the development of signage options. The presentation has been posted to the study webpage at Project Updates (www.vaughan.ca).

A total of 64 stakeholders attended the stakeholder meetings (excluding City staff and councillors), with 40 stakeholders attending the landowner meeting, and 24 attending the resident meeting. Local Councillor Sandra Yeung Racco attended both meetings. Attendees were provided an opportunity to provide questions and comments.

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CONCLUSION



Image credit:
DTAH

CONCLUSION

Across all touchpoints in the engagement plan, certain themes emerged from the public and stakeholder feedback that was received. Overall, the following five themes resonate strongly: (1) parks and green spaces, (2) walking and cycling, (3) connectivity, (4) flexible spaces, and (5) health and well-being. Reaching over 984 individuals and stakeholders, the collected data and findings, as summarized in this report, will be a substantive resource in the development of the master plan.