

Appendix D: York Boulevard Case Study

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Introduction

The York Boulevard Streetscape project was an initiative undertaken by the City of Hamilton to create a market precinct in its downtown as a part of the city’s efforts to make a more pedestrian-friendly, liveable downtown core. The project included the narrowing of the street by reducing the number of lanes, converting the one-way street to a two-way street, installing on-street bike lanes, and adding a number of pedestrian amenities. In addition, the plan allows for the street to be more easily closed in order to hold public events on the street due to the proximity of large public venues nearby.

Study Area

York Boulevard is a major arterial street in the City of Hamilton, Ontario. It serves an alternative to Highway 403, connecting downtown Hamilton to Plains Road in Burlington across the mouth of the Hamilton Harbour. The section of York Boulevard between Bay Street North and James Street North is of interest to this case study (Figure 1a and 1b). This area was included in the York Boulevard Streetscape Master Plan.



Figure 1a - Study Area

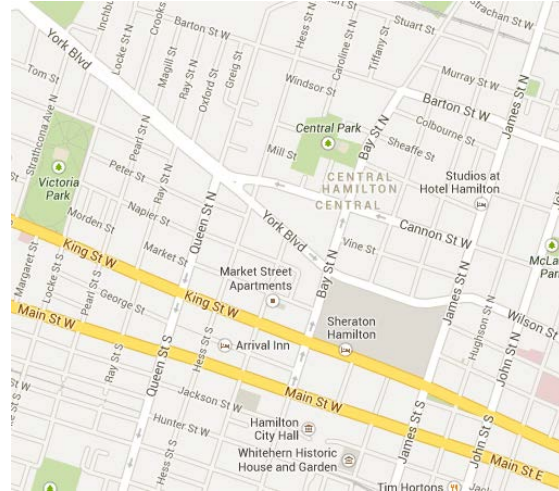


Figure 1b - Study Area Detail

This portion of the boulevard features major destinations, including Jackson Square, Copps Coliseum, the main branch of the Hamilton Public Library, and the Hamilton Farmer’s Market. Along a one-way street, as with many arterial roads through downtown Hamilton, York Boulevard has been designated a “mobility street” by the City, focusing on improving mobility while enhancing the pedestrian environment.

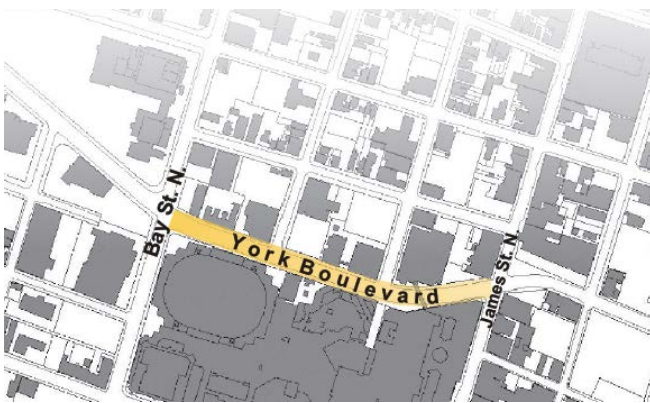


Figure 1c - Study Area Highlight



Above: Streetscape design showing trees, under storey planting modern furniture and lighting. **Below:** York Boulevard closure during a Special Event.



Process

In the Downtown Hamilton Secondary Plan (DHSP) adopted in 2001, the city lays out the challenges that face the downtown core. The downtown, it states, “has been exposed to the same series of stresses that have threatened the well-being of city centres across North America. Disruptive urban renewal schemes, the dominance of vehicular over pedestrian needs, changes in retailing and a population shift toward suburban areas undermined the traditional roles of the Downtown”.ⁱⁱⁱ Titled “Putting People First”, the DHSP was adopted in 2001 alongside the Downtown Hamilton Transportation Master Plan (TMP), and together the two served as an integrated land use and transportation planning exercise. They were the first steps in recent efforts to revitalize the downtown after a protracted period of growth on the urban fringes^{iv}. Included in these plans was a renewed focus on active transportation and reducing the dominance of motor vehicle traffic in the downtown core.

The DHSP acts as a part of the City's Official Plan, meaning Council is legally obligated to implement its policies. The Plan serves to lay out a community vision for the downtown and indicate priorities for City-funded initiatives^v. The Downtown TMP was closely tied to this process, being developed at the same time to offer recommendations regarding the transportation system in order to carry the same force and treat land use and transportation as an overall system rather than as separate issues^{vi}.

The Downtown TMP indicated York Boulevard as a major street that could benefit from one-way to two-way conversion as well as cycling improvements. Thus, the York Boulevard project was initiated in 2007, as Council authorized the creation of a master plan for the street between Bay Street North and James Street North, which had also been recommended in the Hamilton Downtown Mobility Street Master Plan 2003. City Council also began the mandatory 5-year review of the Downtown TMP, which was subsequently approved in 2008. The review's findings were relevant to the ongoing York Boulevard project, notably:

- Greater desire on the part of the public and the City for pedestrian improvements
- Recommendations for York Boulevard to be converted from one-way to two-way
- Need for improved pedestrian amenities and on-street bicycle lanes on York Boulevard

These plans informed the creation of the initial conceptual designs of the York Boulevard project, which were prepared in 2008 for the initial public consultation open house held in November of 2008. The information provided for the public at this open house set out initial principles, including improving the quality of pedestrian amenities and overall pedestrian safety.

The initial concept designs featured three options that all included enhanced widened sidewalks with tree-lined streets; bicycle lanes were not included at this stage^{vii}. The feedback from the open house supported the option that featured the greatest interventions, including lane reductions and the possibility of closing the entire street for festivals. Public feedback also supported "improving cycling opportunities along York with bike lanes and biking facilities"^{viii}.

This feedback was integrated into the second set of concept plans, which were displayed for public input at an open house in February 2009. The revised concept plans included on-street bicycle lanes, reflecting public input. The plans note that they are subject to the Cycling Master Plan (CMP) which was under a process of revision as the York Boulevard plans were being drafted. The CMP, drafted in 1999, did not include York Boulevard as a street requiring cycling facilities. This changed in the revised CMP, which was approved by City Council in June of 2009^{ix}.

Following the open house, staff completed detailed designs for construction of the project in a compressed timeline in order to allow for the streetscape changes to coordinate with other works in the area, including renovations and façade improvements to the Farmer's Market and Public Library as well as local utility work. City Council approved the final plans for the project in December of 2009 at a total cost of \$1.9 million. The work was completed from May to December of 2010.

Lessons

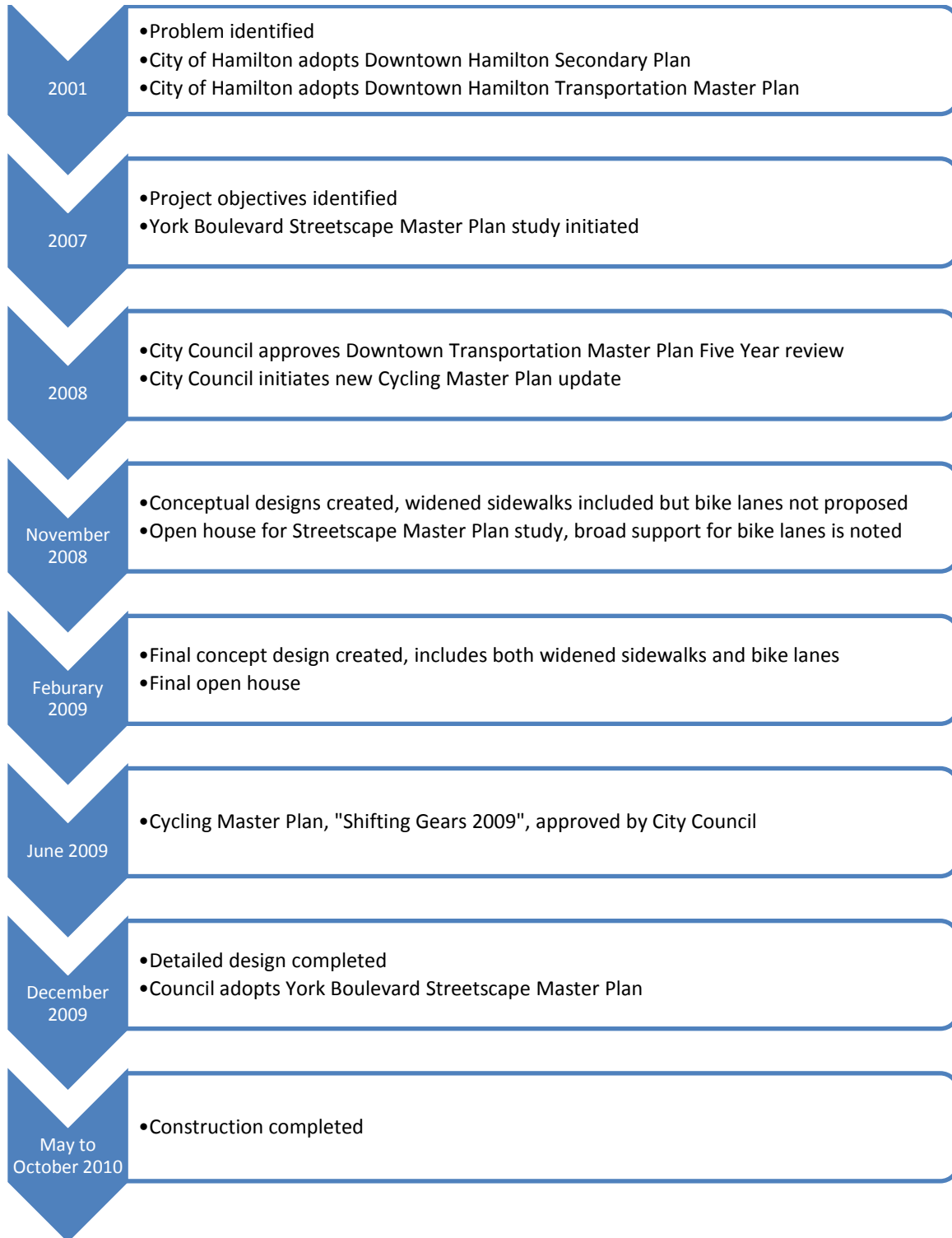
Overlapping revisions and studies of plans can cause uncertainty or provide the opportunity for innovation. The York Boulevard case took place as the city was completing its Downtown TMP and beginning a revision of its CMP. These could have been grounds for delay of the project or hesitation from bold interventions, but instead allowed for the consultations of the York Boulevard project to take advantage of the potential for change and to influence and be influenced by the ongoing parallel plans.

Coordination between major public entities can allow for greater impact and savings in construction efforts. The streetscape construction plans, coordinated by Hamilton's Planning Department, were accelerated in order to coincide with renovations to the Public Library and the Farmer's Market (also publicly owned). This permitted more dramatic changes to the area and avoided prolonged rounds of construction of the same area.

A project's success and feedback must be considered over a long-term timeline. The report emphasizes the need to communicate with impacted local residents and to give ample time to residents to acclimatize to the changes before evaluating them. In one survey of businesses along James Street, which was converted from a one-way to a two-way street in two phases, there was much higher support from those businesses along the phase that took place three years earlier than those on the more recently converted street – demonstrating that adjustment time, among other factors, is a factor of support for changes and the likelihood of building success for similar projects elsewhere.

Communication of plans and potential changes are critical to public approval, and a robust engagement process can be important in identifying misconceptions among the public regarding the challenges of a project and its likely consequences. The Downtown TMP review found over 50% of residents were opposed to the proposed one-way to two-way conversions of downtown streets, but that such conversions were necessary to change the character of the street from one of motor vehicle predominance. In the York Boulevard case, public engagement was handled largely by Public Works staff that approached the issue in a highly technical manner that did not confront common beliefs that one-way to two-way conversions inevitably lead to stagnation, and did not adequately offer arguments for the social and health benefits of the conversion. In cases such as this, which challenge longstanding patterns of use and commonly-held beliefs, public engagement needs to make the case with a comprehensive engagement strategy.

Timeline



Contact

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ⁱ Ahmad, K. Department of Planning, (2010). *York boulevard streetscape master plan*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton.

ⁱⁱ Ahmad, K. Department of Planning, (2010). *York boulevard streetscape master plan*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton.

ⁱⁱⁱ Planning and Economic Development Department, (2005). *Putting people first: the new land use plan for downtown hamilton*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton.

^{iv} IBI Group, (2008). *Downtown transportation master plan five year EA review*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton.

^v Planning and Economic Development Department, (2005). *Putting people first: the new land use plan for downtown hamilton*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton.

^{vi} IBI Group, (2008). *Downtown transportation master plan five year EA review*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton.

^{vii} Planning and Economic Development Department, (2008). *York boulevard streetscape master plan: public open house february 2008*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton (p. 3).

^{viii} Ahmad, K. Planning and Economic Development Department, (2009). *York boulevard streetscape master plan: city council motion ped10002*. Hamilton, ON: City of Hamilton (p. 6).

^{ix} *Shifting gears – hamilton’s cycling master plan*. (2009, June 24). Retrieved from <http://www.hamilton.ca/CityDepartments/PublicWorks/CommunityServicesRelatedPoliciesAndGuidelines/Cycling/shiftinggears.htm>