

Retrofitting Sprawl for Transit-Oriented-Development: Using “Visioning” to Create a 21st Century Main Street in Mississauga and Brampton, Ontario, Canada

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The cities of Mississauga (pop. 669,000 – 6th largest in Canada) and Brampton (pop. 434,000 – 10th largest in Canada) are just west of Toronto (Figure 1) and considered by many Canadian planning scholars to be epitome of low density suburban sprawl in a Canadian context. Mississauga has largely grown through the suburbanisation of agricultural lands characterized by Canada’s largest planned suburban downtown¹ and the city has morphed into a contiguous component of the Greater Toronto

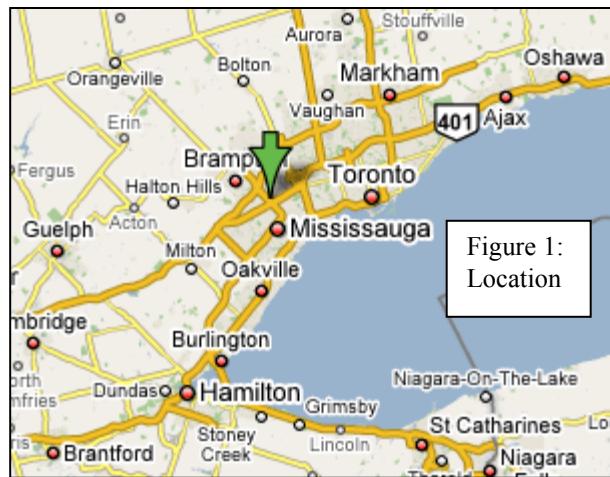


Figure 1: Location

Region (Hutton, 2010). Amongst the fastest growing cities in North America, Mississauga recently consumed all of its greenfield sites and can only grow through intensification, infill and brownfield development. Table 1 depicts population growth in Mississauga from 1809 through to 2001. Ms. Hazel McCallion, mayor from 1974 to the present, the longest serving mayor in Canada, was instrumental in directing this rapid growth. As Urbaniac (2011) points out:

“The energetic and feisty McCallion also had the good fortune to become mayor when she did. The once-dominant big developers and “good ol’ boys” were reeling in 1978 from bad investments and bad publicity. Meanwhile, the City already had the basic capacity to allow sprawl on empty “greenfields.” That meant that most development was not in the established neighbourhoods, and therefore not too controversial. McCallion’s development

Table 1:
Population, Toronto Township, Port Credit, Streetsville and City of Mississauga, 1809-2001

Year	Population			
	Toronto Township	Port Credit	Streetsville	Total
1809	175	—	—	—
1821	803	226 ¹	—	—
1835	4,000	—	500 ²	—
1851	7,539	400 ³	1,000	—
1901	5,208	650 ⁴	522	—
1921	6,981	1,123	615	8,719
1931	9,935	1,635	661	12,231
1941	12,481	2,160	709	15,350
1951	28,528	3,643	1,139	33,310
1956	47,053	6,350	2,848	56,051
1961	62,616	7,203	5,056	74,875
1966	93,492	8,475	5,884	107,851
1971 ⁵	156,070	9,442	6,840	172,352
1976 ⁶				250,017
1981				315,055
1986				374,005
1991				463,388
1996				544,382
2001				612,925

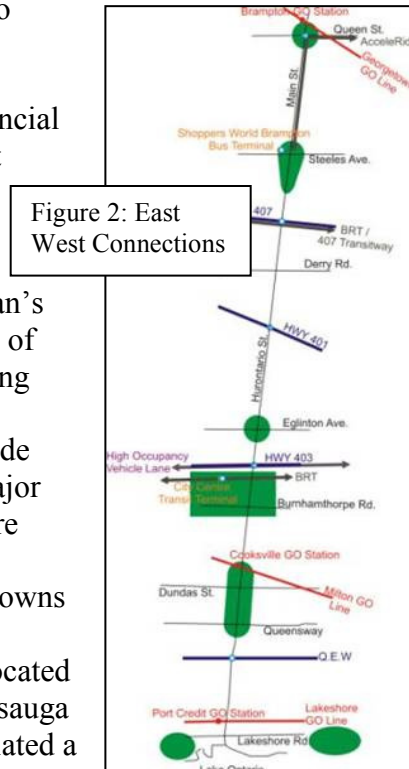
Sources: Dieterman, F. Mississauga: The First 10,000 Years (2002); Riendeau, R.E. Mississauga: An Illustrated History (1985); Statistics Canada.

¹ Just for interest the downtown was created around a very large “catalytic” indoor shopping centre – “Square 1”

charges kept the good times rolling with gleaming new facilities and infrastructure. The emerging city needed a landmark, or an anchor. It found that in its self-assured matriarch.”²

Like all cities in Ontario except Toronto, public transportation is serviced by an antiquated fleet of busses with little transit signal priority ubiquitous to auto-centric curvilinear community design (Schiller et. al. 2010) that seeks to maximize automobile level-of-service in terms of traffic density (Hostovsky et. al., 2004). Historically rapid transit in Mississauga, including the GO (Government of Ontario) heavy rail service, has focussed on moving commuters into downtown Toronto (Powell, 2011). With suburb-to-suburb transportation becoming increasingly more important than servicing commuting to neighbouring Toronto, the Ontario Provincial Growth Plan recommends that public transit be the first priority for infrastructure investment.

Ontario’s 2006 “Places to Grow” plan (OMOI, 2011) provides the policy direction for municipalities. The plan’s major paradigm shift is directed towards intensification of existing built up areas and maximizing the use of existing infrastructure, rather than business-as-usual greenfield development. “Urban Growth” centres in the plan include downtown Brampton and downtown Mississauga as major nodes for urban intensification. Further, the 20 kilometre north-south Mississauga Hurontario Street (Hwy 10) - Brampton Main Street corridor connecting these downtowns is classified as a “Higher Order Transit Corridor” with several mobility hubs and major transit stations areas located with east-west rapid transit corridors (Figure 2). Mississauga has participated in a number of “car free days” and initiated a smart commute program³, thus evidence of a grassroots move from automobile dependency that research indicates is useful in promoting future smart growth (Even-Har and Hostovsky, 2006).



Besides the issues of efficient, higher order transportation systems, the City of Mississauga is also struggling with a public image of suburbia and the lack of “sense of place” that generally does not exist along the Hurontario corridor. Much of the corridor is auto-centric, appearing desolate and lacking in architectural or public space value. Land use varies considerably along the corridor, reflecting the evolution of land use form over the past century or more. It ranges from stable low-density residential areas through to high density residential, strip-malls with large parking footprints to auto-dominated office towers and big-box retail zones with oversized parking footprints. Existing urban design

² As a note of irony - in 2002 Mayor McCallion was appointed Chair of the Central Ontario Smart Growth Panel by the Hon. Chris Hodgson, Minister of Municipal Affairs

³ <http://smartcommutemiss.ca>

varies considerably as well, from Victorian streetscapes in the heritage area, to the very modern building forms appearing in Mississauga’s downtown core areas. A cruise along the street using Google “Streetview” will attest to this present state of affairs. As a result this potential redevelopment of much of the corridor using transit-oriented-development presents an opportunity to build public and private spaces that are pedestrian and bicycle friendly using new urbanist design principles. Hence the study team coined the phrase “creating a 21st century main street” to conceptualize this objective.⁴

The Cities of Brampton and Mississauga have supported these ideas and see this Plan as a critical city-building initiative that will help them remain socially, environmentally and economically sustainable and competitive communities. The Province of Ontario recently created a crown corporation, Metrolinx, which is investing billions of dollars in regional transportation planning and implementing higher-order transit systems (subway, light rail transit, bus rapid transit) in the greater Toronto area (Metrolinx, 2011). Hurontario – Main Street, one of Metrolinx’s priority projects, is an 20 kilometre north-south corridor linking the central business areas of Mississauga to downtown Brampton.

Ontario’s Environmental Assessment Act requires public consultation on major municipal infrastructure projects. The planning process for these types of EA’s is laid out in the Municipal Engineers Association Class Environmental Assessment process⁵. The Class EA has a statutory minimum level of consultation requiring two public information centres for transit projects of this nature, generally set up in a drop-in format with kiosks. For the majority of Class EAs in the province, proponents implement only these two meetings. The cities decided for the Hurontario-Main Street EA that a minimal public engagement process would not help to achieve the desired goals, as Hutton (2011) points out about their process:

“...extensive public engagement process which included: public information centres; community workshops; community television; presentations and displays at a range of public events, stakeholders circulations and project newsletters that went out to over 40,000 addresses along the corridor and were also available in various other locations. The project also reached out to stakeholders through electronic media such as the web site (www.hurontario-main.ca), emails and Facebook. A business /developer symposium was also held to target the perspective of these critical stakeholders whose input and support was critical to the success of this project.”

Of particular importance was the implementation of eight community “visioning” workshops held in 2008 (the author was one of the facilitators hired to conduct these workshops). Visioning as a planning tool became commonplace in Canada during the 1990s to 2000s (Grant, 2008); hence there is nothing special in terms of using visioning in this case study. Notwithstanding, the master plan environmental assessment used a participatory planning approach that relied on the CHOICE method for “visioning” as one of the primary tools for shaping the plan. O’Brien and Meadows (2001) point out

⁴ <http://www.hurontario-main.ca>

⁵ <http://www.municipalclassea.ca/>

that “a variety of definitions of the term “vision” exist in the literature; the common theme among them all is that a vision for an organization, group, or community is an image of what they desire to be, and which they have the power to bring to life.” (p. 496). O’Brien and Meadows literature review of visioning identified five key dimensions to the technique:

1. Analysis of the organization’s current situation/internal environment
2. Assessment of the external environment
3. Identification of desired future state(s), (vision)
4. Connection of the future to the present state
5. Testing the vision

Hodge and Gordon (2009) point out the community visioning generally involves a wide array of community members collaborating in terms of alternative urban designs through citizen produced maps, drawings, and statements (text). They also point out that a visioning is not the same as a “design charette” that usually uses urban design professionals in small groups to draw/build a concept site plan on a particular piece of property. Besides design ideas, they suggest that consensus is one of the most important outcomes of visioning as a planning technique.

The goal of this research was to investigate the role visioning played in developing the higher order transit system and its effect on community design for the 21st century main street. This ongoing work uses a case-study approach (Yin, 2009) by reviewing key activities of the project and the contribution of the public visioning exercise to the planning process. Document analysis, key informant interviews (city project managers, consultants, NGOs and public stakeholders) and the author’s personal experiences on the project are being used to evaluate the effectiveness of the visioning exercise towards contributing to a social responsive and environmental sustainable vision (Schiller et. al. 2010). The author was part of the consulting team, the project Environmental Planner and one of the Facilitators for eight community visioning exercises and four open houses along the corridor representing the distinct communities in the study corridor.

Research questions include:

- Why did the study team go well beyond the required 2 public meetings for Class EA transit projects?
- Why did they choose visioning as a public engagement techniques?



- Did and how did visioning affect the transit technology choice and urban redesign outcomes (TOD)?
- As the corridor contains eight distinct communities, are there any local preferences and conflicts that had to be accounted for in the master plan?

Hurontario-Main Visioning Methodology

Eight community visioning workshops were extensively advertised and then held in their respective communities in October and November of 2008. Participants had to pre-register online or via telephone and had to live in the community to qualify (Figure 3). Facilitators, comprised of consultants and city staff, were trained by the lead facilitator and an 18 page visioning overview package was given to each facilitator with goals, objectives and questions/activities described in detail. Six to nine facilitators and a lead facilitator were assigned to each workshop, depending on registered attendance, with one “floater” available. The objective was to have a low participant to facilitator ratio, generally less than 10 to 1. The visioning workshop included facilitated questions and participant activities, especially the interactive use of mapping, sometimes termed “cognitive mapping”. Expected outcomes for the visioning included:

1. List of opportunities and constraints for each of the 8 character areas for rapid transit
2. Develop a Conceptual Character Plan for each character area
3. A long term vision for the entire corridor and each character area
4. An urban design and guidelines for each character area

Workshop questions/activities included the following⁶:

1. What destinations do you value in your community and along Hurontario/Main Street? What types of places do you enjoy walking in? (note: please identify on maps)
2. What does a rapid transit system on Hurontario/Main Street need to be to get you out of your car. Fast? Links to specific destinations? Connections to GO (Government of Ontario heavy rail transit)? Which GO station? Better quality ride than the existing bus?
3. What does the land use along Hurontario/Main Street need to be to make you want to take transit more? More mixed use? More employment, residential, retail or community facilities like libraries?
4. What form of development and streetscape along Hurontario/Main Street would support you in taking transit? Large shopping destinations? Street front retail and restaurants? Mixed-used buildings? Wider sidewalks? Better access for bikes?
5. Are there any additional opportunities in your community?
6. Are there any additional constraints in your community?

After these discussion questions, the facilitators led the participants through a design typologies exercise using supplied mapping. Activities included:

⁶ <http://www.hurontario-main.ca/PDFs/Discussion%20Questions.pdf>

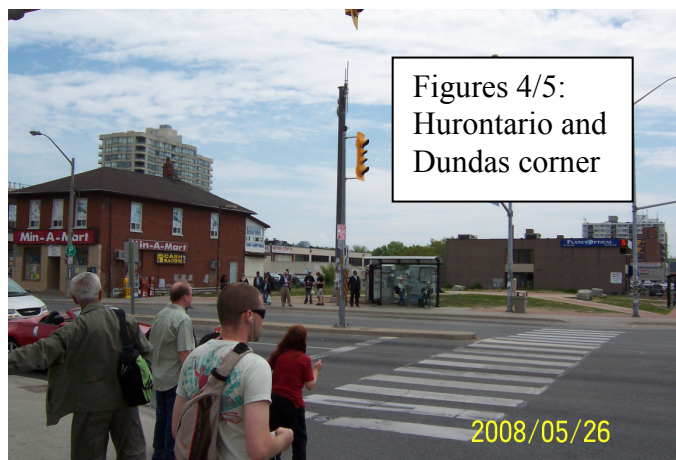
- Activity 1: Define station locations based on links to presence of destinations, other transit services and opportunities for development. (note: please identify on maps)
- Activity 2: Take the 500 m radius template provided, and within a 500 m circle around those stations, put a dot on potential intensification/redevelopment sites. (note: please identify on maps)
- Activity 3: Using a marker, draw the options for routes within the community: how far should the transit service go? If Hurontario/Main Street is narrow, what alternative streets could be used as one-way loops? Should there be short underground sections? (note: please identify on maps and clarify information in text box)

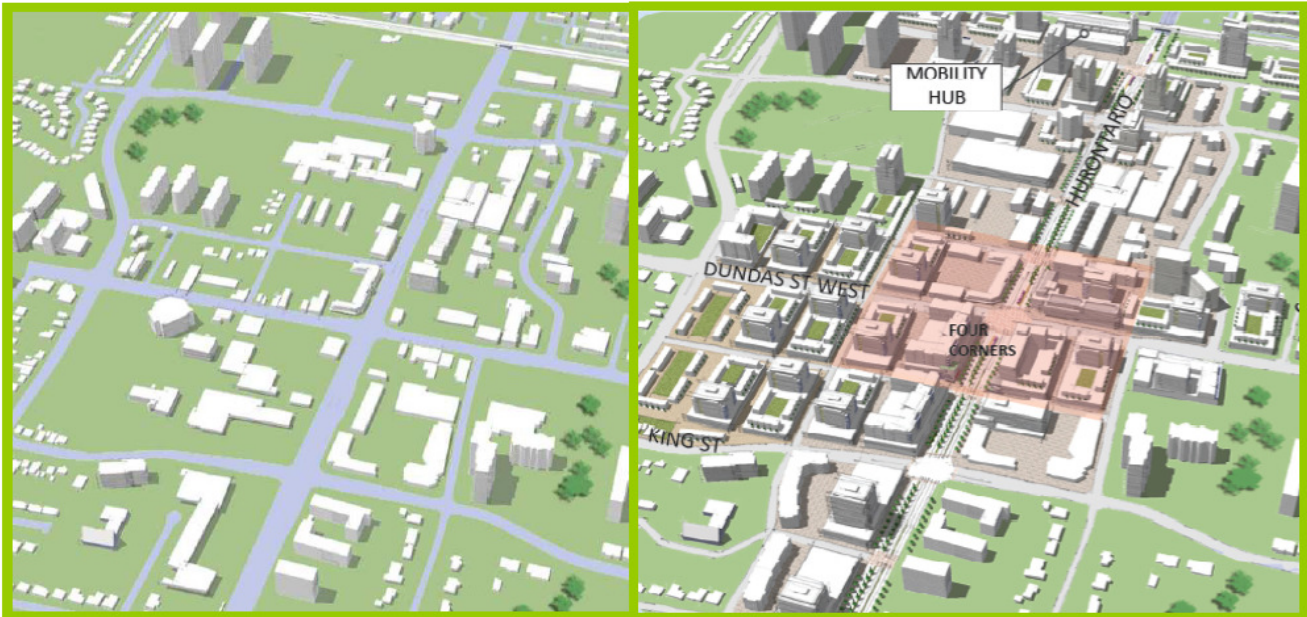
The workshop concluded with a plenary forum where each table’s facilitator reported back on their participants’ vision for their community.

The results of these workshops were published in a “Directions Report” and placed on the project web site for public review and comment. In the interest of brevity, I will review the vision for the Cooksville character area. Arguably this community one in much need of redesign due to years of planning neglect. Figures 4 and 5 are photographs I took in 2008 to demonstrate existing conditions in Cooksville at Hurontario and Dundas streets, described in the Directions Report as:

“The Village of Cooksville is centered on the intersection of Hurontario and Dundas Streets, two of the most important roads in the region. The community dates back to the early 1800s, though the majority of the original buildings are long gone, replaced by mid-twentieth century commercial plazas surrounded by low-rise apartment buildings” (p. 47)

Based on the visioning exercise and other input, the new vision is to build upon the “Cooksville village” heritage, transform the built form to a mixed-use, mid-density node with business, retail, cafés, restaurants, cultural and community services building on the Provincial Growth Plan Urban Growth Centre designation. Figure 6 and 7 are conceptual diagrams for the redevelopment and intensification of the Cookville’s main corner using TOD concepts.





Figures 6 and 7: Cookville Character Area Redevelopment Concepts



- Revive the “Village” and develop a “Four Corners” at Hurontario and Dundas Streets through:
- New compact and mixed-use transit-oriented development;
 - A pedestrian-scaled streetscape with active uses and landscaping; and
 - Connections to GO Transit, local transit service and the proposed Dundas higher-order transit system.

Conceptual view of Hurontario and Dundas Street intersection

Table 2 below describes the emerging visions and transit consideration based on urban design, planning and engineering analysis of the Cooksville visioning workshop.

Emerging Vision	Transit Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 300-400 ppj • Build upon the “village” heritage • Transformed built form • A mixed-use, mid-density node with business, retail, cafés, restaurants, cultural and community services building on UGC designation • A new pedestrian-oriented street with continuous podiums fronting the street, active uses and new TOD • Opportunity to reconfigure existing sites to create TOD • New pedestrian connections to surrounding residential and parks • Compact built form creating a continuous line of buildings 3-5 storeys in height, allowing for taller building elements set back from the street line when appropriate • Animated uses such as retail at grade on portions of Hurontario Street pedestrian environment that extend through the former village, from Floradale Drive and through to the GO Station mobility hub (inclusive of proposed development) • Widen sidewalks and paths promoting other pedestrian scale movement opportunities (e.g. bicycles, in-line skating, etc.) • Enhanced streetscape and landscaping, and buildings at the street edge to reinforce the ‘mainstreet’ character 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centre of street alignment • Dedicated lanes on Hurontario • Gateway mobility hub (Metrolinx) connecting to Dundas higher-order transit system and Cooksville GO Station • Serve latent demand • New riders from new development
Bold Directions	
Revive the “Village” with new TODs (e.g. GO Station) and a “4 Corners” at Hurontario and Dundas.	

Input from the visioning and other engagement techniques assisted with the selection of the project environmental assessment’s preferred alternative. The preferred scenario includes conversion of the existing six-lane cross-section segments to four lanes for auto use and two reserved lanes for light rail transit. The corridor will link the urban growth centres while traversing five mobility hubs – which are identified locations for future inter-regional transit connections and enhanced transit-oriented development. The corridor has significant potential for intensification and/or redevelopment. The cities can capitalize on opportunities throughout the corridor, through a comprehensive and bold planning framework. The two Cities envision the plan for Hurontario/Main Street as a critical city-building initiative that will help them remain socially, environmentally and economically sustainable and competitive.

I am presently in the middle of interviewing key informants, hence it is too early to make definitive conclusions about the utility of these visioning workshops to the planning process. Further, it will take several years to before much of the transit infrastructure is initiated, hence this work can only be preliminary in nature, subject to a historical review of on-the-ground implementation a decade or so from now. Notwithstanding these caveats, visioning appears to have contributed to the evolution of the Hurontario/Main Street corridor, reflecting a public preference for integration of rapid transit service, land use/zoning changes, transit-oriented-development and urban design that is pedestrian and

bicycle friendly (Pucher, 2004). Mississauga city council endorsed the Master Plan in July of 2010. However, Provincial Environmental Assessment Act approval has yet to be applied for and granted under the MEA Class EA process (this process can be fraught with problems as public discourse on a community’s vision for the future is often quite different from the expert driven discourse of public review agency scrutiny).

Key informants interviewed to date have strongly suggested that the study team had to go well beyond the required two Public Information Centres mandated by the Class EA process. In order to make such sweeping changes - that is, from low-density sprawl to TOD with higher densities, as well as to implement community revitalization, it was necessary to engage citizens in the intimate environment that visioning provides. Further, as the literature points out there is nothing new about using visioning in Canadian planning. In fact, key informants pointed out that the City of Mississauga had just previously been through a city-wide strategic planning process (Our Future Mississauga) using visioning as a cornerstone of the public engagement process. Key informants pointed out that staff were merely extending the use of their visioning technique.⁷

As Grant (2008) points out about the use of visioning... “a visioning exercise conducted in 1970 would have produced a vigorously modern future for discussion; then, we expected technology to solve our problems”. However, concerning the recent uses of visioning in planning, she so correctly says... “everyone pictures the medieval village; no one sees cars in the future”. (p. 150)

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