



Supporting Communities During Major Transit Infrastructure Projects

A Case Study of Thorncliffe Park in Toronto

DECEMBER 2023



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CUI is Canada's Urban Institute. We are a national platform where policy makers, urban professionals, civic and business leaders, community activists, and academics can learn, share, and collaborate with one another from coast to coast to coast. Our mission is to support vibrant, equitable, livable, and resilient cities in Canada through research, engagement, and storytelling.

Contact Us

cui@canurb.org

canurb.org

416.365.0816

30 St. Patrick St, Suite 500
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 3A3

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Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the City of Toronto is located on the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. It is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. We acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit, and the Williams Treaties signed with multiple Mississaugas and Chippewa bands. Toronto is part of the vast Dish With One Spoon Territory, created by treaty between the Anishnabeg, Mississaugas, and Haudenosaunee to share the territory and protect the land. Newcomers over the generations have been invited into the treaty in the spirit of peace, friendship, and respect.

We are all Treaty people. Many of us have come here as settlers, immigrants, and newcomers in this generation or generations past. We'd like to also acknowledge and honour those who came here involuntarily, particularly the descendants of peoples brought here through enslavement. We recognize that colonization and associated attitudes, policies, and institutions have significantly changed Indigenous Peoples' relationship with this land and continues to impact diverse peoples' relationships with each other.



Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by the Canadian Urban Institute with support from the City of Toronto's Economic Development and Culture Division.

CUI thanks the members of the Thorncliffe Park community for taking the time to speak with us during our engagement process. Their insights and lived experiences helped us understand the impact of Ontario Line subway construction on the vitality of local establishments in Thorncliffe Park. Based on those learnings, we were able to propose options to address the community's need for equitable construction mitigation efforts in their neighbourhood, and across the city.

Special thanks to **The Neighbourhood Organization** for providing CUI with space at the Thorncliffe Park Youth Wellness Hub.

Canadian Urban Institute

Leandro Gabriel Santos

Research Planner, Engagement Lead and Report Author

Jennifer Barrett

Managing Director of Programs, Planning and Policy

Alex Tabascio

Data Analyst

Ananmay Sharan

GIS Platform Developer and Data Analyst

Samantha Staresincic

Senior Manager of Communications

Omar Hirji

Planning Intern

With thanks to:

Jared Kolb

Zahireen Tarefdar

David Scrivener

City of Toronto

Lesley Vaage

Manager, Main Street Initiatives

Rebecca Condon

Manager, Business Improvement Areas Office

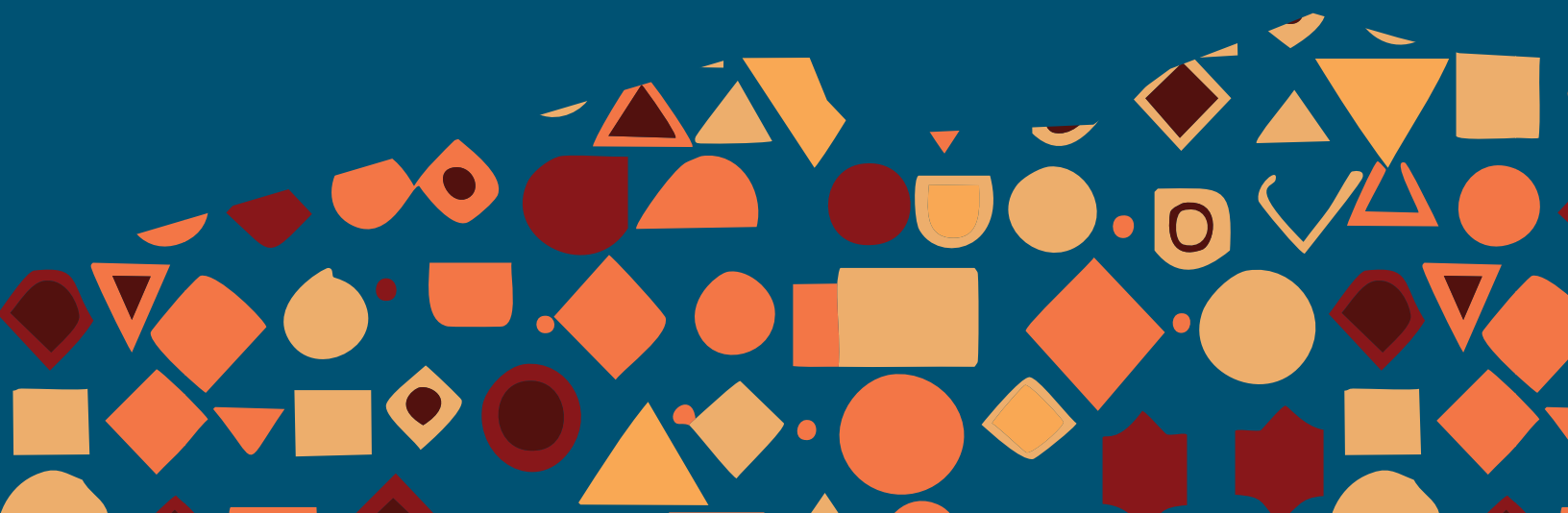
Production Support

Kevin Yip

Graphic Designer

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Executive Summary

The Canadian Urban Institute, in partnership with the City of Toronto, selected the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood as a case study to explore the impacts of Ontario Line subway infrastructure construction on main street establishments. Subway construction is currently underway, led by Metrolinx, an agency of the Province of Ontario. We chose this neighbourhood because of its diverse equity-deserving population, its lack of a formal business improvement association, and the ongoing and planned displacement of dozens of small businesses and hundreds of jobs due to construction disruptions.

We interviewed owners and tenants of business establishments, as well as community members in Thorncliffe Park; conducted comparative best practice research on municipal construction mitigation initiatives in Canada and the United States; and assessed the range and accessibility of municipal supports for businesses experiencing construction-related impacts.

We propose ten initiatives to support small establishments facing make-or-break construction disruptions across Toronto, and the community in Thorncliffe Park.

Proposed Initiatives

To provide the necessary direct-to-establishment supports identified by CUI’s best practice research, the City of Toronto should consider the following initiatives:

- Authorize a city-wide “Transit Construction Mitigation” Community Improvement Plan that defines areas around major transit expansion project sites. This plan will provide direct financial supports for small establishments impacted by construction disruptions.
- Authorize an expedited permit and licence approvals process for establishments seeking to relocate due to transit expansion property acquisition or construction disruption impacts on operation.

To better support establishments facing construction disruptions, City staff should:

- Onboard dedicated municipal staff and trusted local organizations to provide communication and support channels.
- Develop training programs to support establishments, including handout materials with construction mitigation guidance in multiple languages.

- Create an “Open for Business Wayfinding Signage” business support program to increase the visibility of establishments through construction disruptions.
- Clarify timelines with Metrolinx and construction contractors, including scheduled construction phases and traffic disruptions.
- Create a municipal liaison position to provide a navigation service with the purpose of aiding relocating establishments to prepare applications for permitting and licensing.

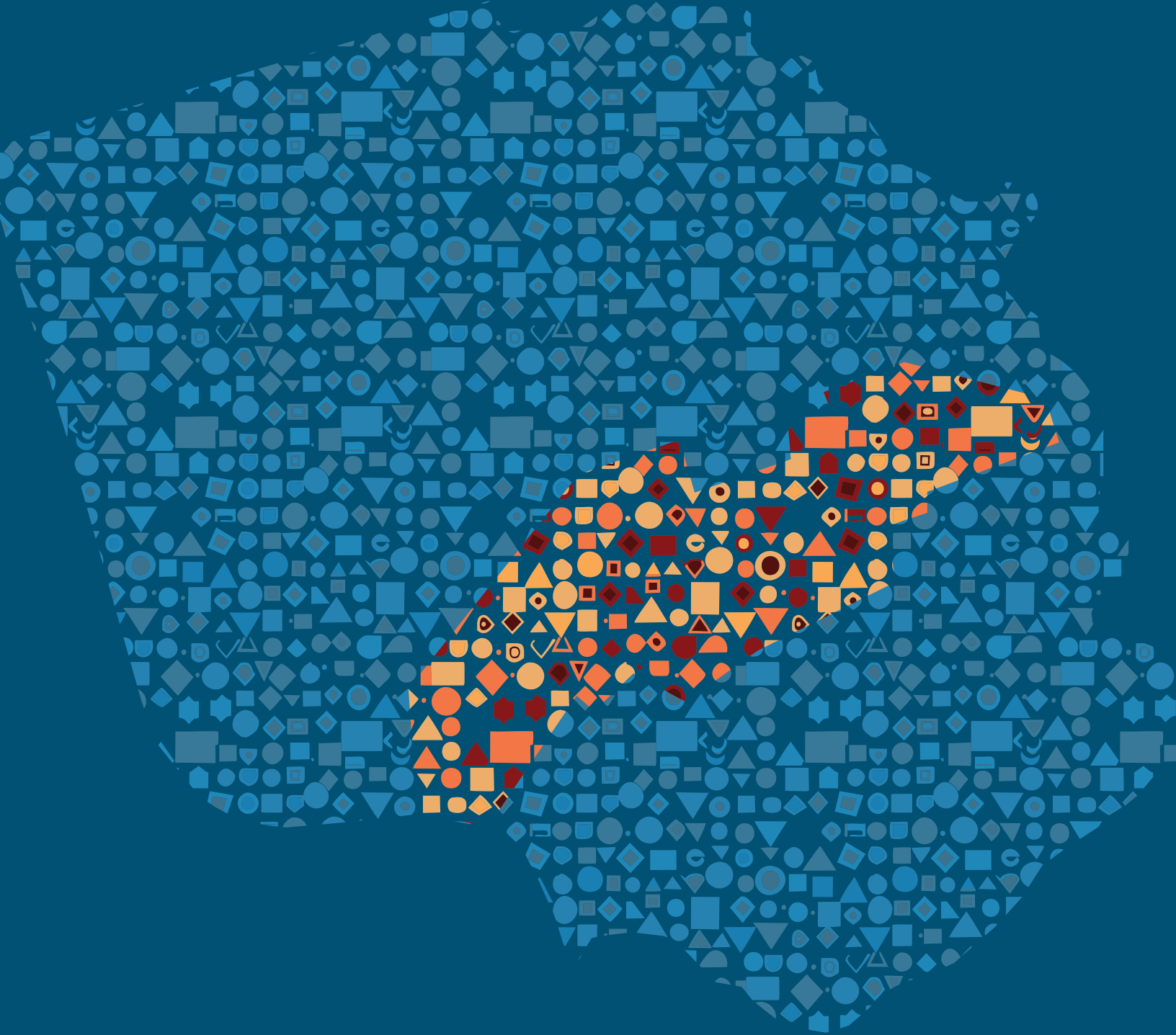
To support Thorncliffe Park’s establishments in gaining access to available business supports, City staff should:

- Conduct a municipally-led education initiative about the benefits of establishing a Business Improvement Area for the Thorncliffe Park area.

To ensure that Thorncliffe Park’s diverse communities benefit from growth and development spurred by the new Ontario Line connection, City staff should:

- Conduct a secondary planning study into the feasibility of creating a Thorncliffe Park Secondary Plan.
- Conduct a Thorncliffe Park Community Services and Facilities Study.





Introduction

Introduction

Study Context

The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI), in partnership with City of Toronto staff, chose Thorncliffe Park as a case study to explore existing and innovative supports for main street businesses and other establishments facing operational disruption and displacement.

Facing a slate of higher-order transit (subway and light rail train) infrastructure construction disruptions, Toronto’s main street establishments need both time-tested and innovative approaches to mitigate the impacts of construction and redevelopment. The Metrolinx-led Ontario Line subway presents a unique opportunity to learn from the experience of main street establishments in the city. As a “higher-order” transit project currently under construction, it will stretch 15.6 kilometres from Exhibition Place (just west of the downtown core) to the Ontario Science Centre (to the northeast). Figure 1 shows the location of the new subway line and stations, including in the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood – the focus of this case study.

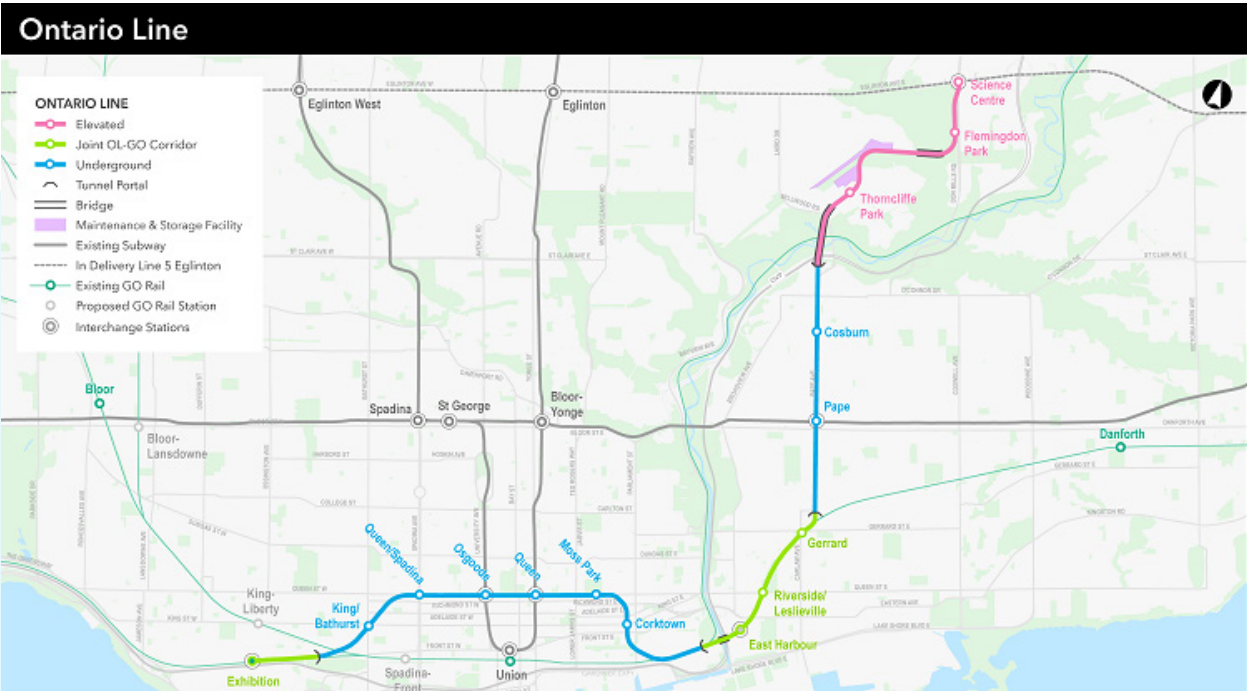


Figure 1: Ontario Line Project Map
Metrolinx, 2022

The new line is intended to improve residents' access to transit and employment opportunities, reduce crowding at Toronto's busiest subway stations, and reduce daily vehicular congestion. However, while the transit investment is anticipated to bring benefits to Toronto residents, the short-term construction disruption is showing itself to be too much for affected small businesses (and other establishments) to manage without support. In Thorncliffe Park, the construction of a new subway maintenance and storage facility (MSF) is already displacing dozens of small businesses and hundreds of jobs.

About Thorncliffe Park

With just over 21,000 residents (2016 Census), Thorncliffe Park is a diverse, vibrant, equity-deserving neighbourhood. Many people live in rental apartment towers, have a first language other than English or French, and have lower incomes compared to many other Toronto neighbourhoods.

The neighbourhood is located close to geographic centre of Toronto (Figure 2). It is bound by Millwood Road to the southwest, Leaside Drive to the west, Eglinton Avenue East to the northwest, and the meandering curve of the Don River to the northeast, east, and south. The area is bisected from north to southwest by the Canadian Pacific Railway and a utility corridor.

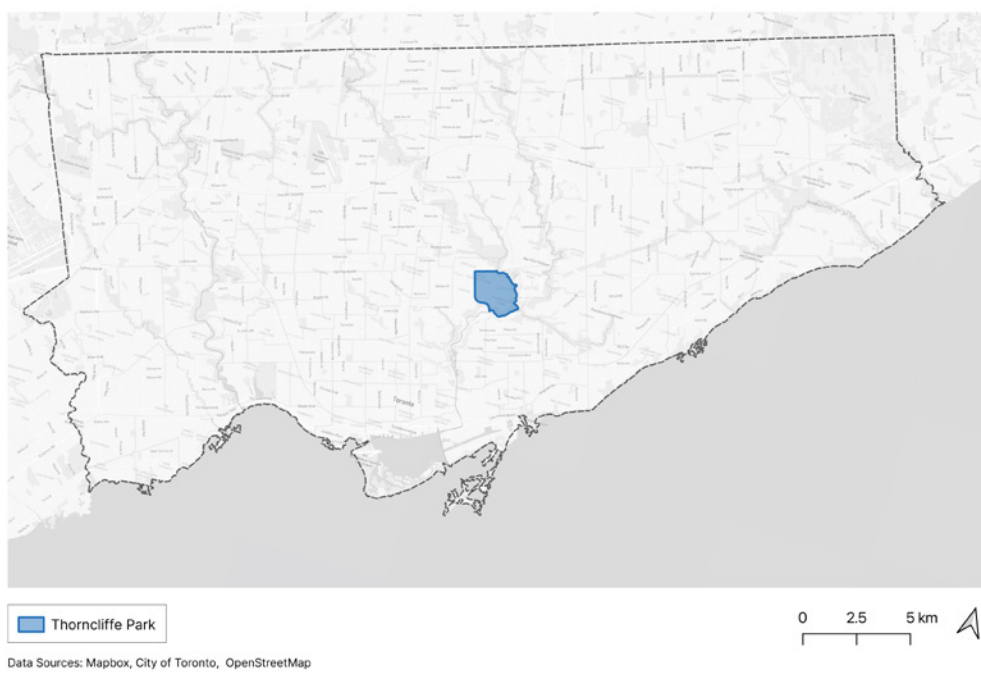


Figure 2: Thorncliffe Park Location in Toronto
2023

Industrial and commercial uses are located to the northwest of the railway line (Figure 3). To the southeast of the railway are low-density, suburban-style strip malls, plazas, and parking lots hosting primarily commercial and industrial uses with some institutional uses, including religious, medical, and non-profit establishments. The East York Town Centre shopping mall sits further south of Overlea Boulevard, the main street through the neighbourhood. Residents are primarily concentrated further southeast in apartment tower complexes.



Figure 3: Thorncliffe Park Neighbourhood Boundary 2023

Before construction, more than 700 people were employed in dozens of businesses located in strip malls and plazas between the railway and Overlea Boulevard. Unlike in 83 other Toronto neighbourhoods, these businesses are not part of a formal municipal Business Improvement Area association, and as a result, lack a formal channel to communicate with the City about their business needs and initiatives.

2016 Demographic Snapshot of Thorncliffe Park



Population of
21,108



A younger community
with a median
age of 32 years

39 years city-wide



46% of private
households have
**low-income
status**

*20% city-wide, based on
the federal Low Income
Measure, after-tax*



89% of the
neighbourhood
rents

47% city-wide



**A culturally and linguistically diverse
neighbourhood**

74% of residents have non-official language
as their mother tongue

46% city-wide

Top five non-English mother tongues:

Urdu (24.4%)

Pashto (5.1%)

Tagalog (4.7%)

Farsi (4.6%)

Gujarati (4.1%)

1 City of Toronto Neighbourhood Profile data, adapted from Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.

Figures 4 and 5 show the common evening/home location of daily visitors to the Thorncliffe Park establishment area (just south of the railway line) in 2022, with the highest concentrations indicated in red. As is visible in the “hot spots” (just below and to the northeast of the study area), visitors to the establishments hailed mainly from Thorncliffe Park, with secondary concentrations from the adjacent Flemingdon Park neighbourhood, highlighting the locally based clientele.²

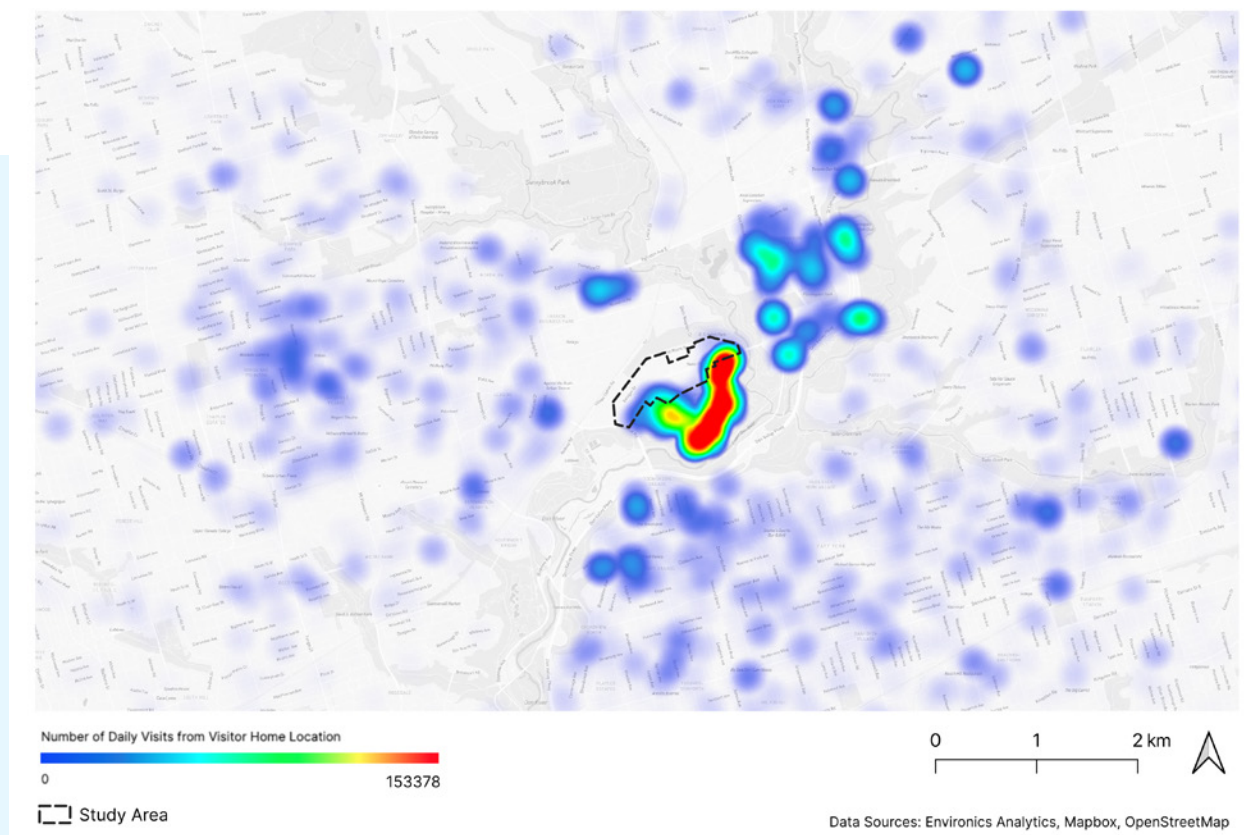


Figure 4: Common Evening Location of Visitors to Thorncliffe Park Study Area 2022

2 Canadian Urban Institute. (2023). Research and Knowledge Initiative: Environics Analytics, MobileScapes mobile movement data, 2022. Methodology: The heatmaps in Figure 4 and Figure 5 utilize aggregated mobile phone GPS location data to determine the most common location of visitors to Thorncliffe Park establishments between the hours of 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 a.m. The maps visualize concentrations of average daily visitors across the entirety of 2022. This study area does not include R.V. Burgess Park outdoor market establishments. Anonymized data is used as a proxy to estimate residential location.

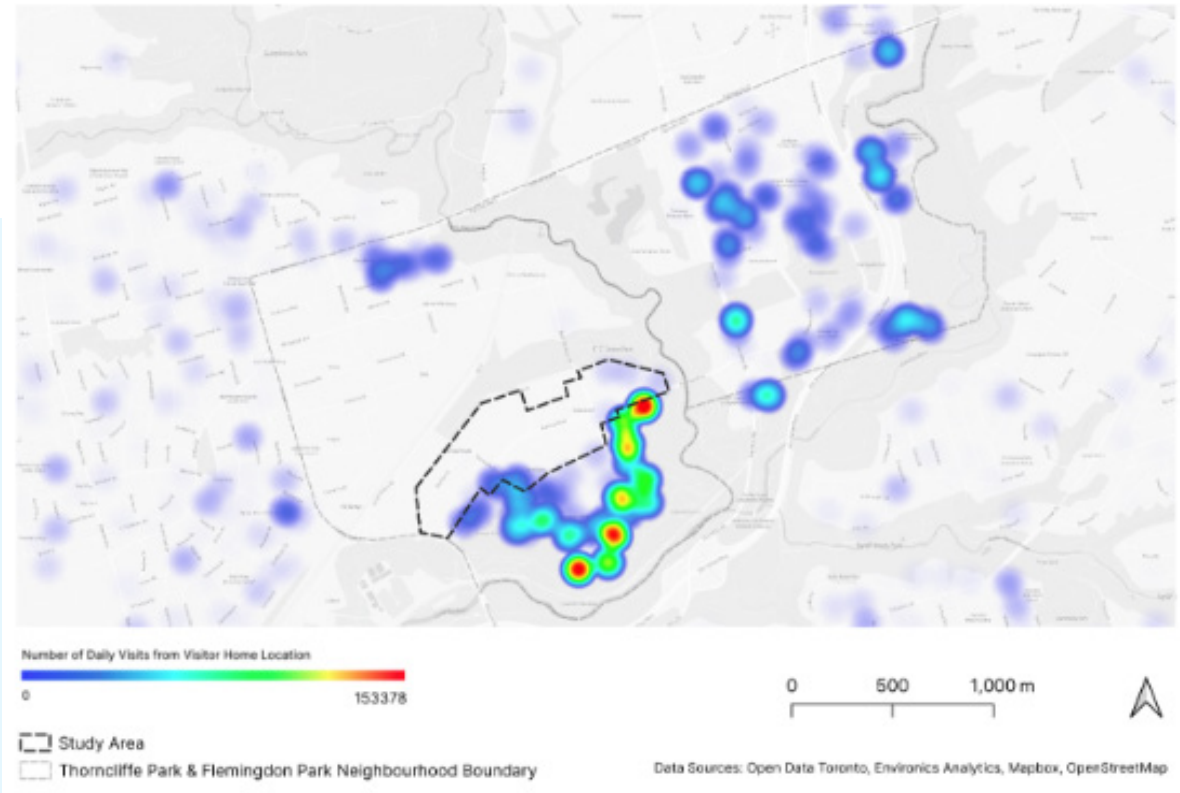


Figure 5: Common Evening Location of Visitors to Thorncliffe Park Study Area, Zoomed In 2022





Impacts of construction to-date

In 2021, Metrolinx, the provincial transit agency, announced its decision to locate the Ontario Line’s maintenance and storage facility (MSF) in Thorncliffe Park (known locally as the “rail yard”). The agency’s policy is to enter into direct negotiations with landowners for the acquisition of the properties required for building Ontario Line infrastructure. Each case is considered independently with support tailored to “specific needs” of tenants. While citing that the project would displace 700 jobs and 57 businesses, Metrolinx’s evaluators stated that the community impact was a “manageable disruption to local business/employment/community support as they can be relocated within Thorncliffe.”³

Despite Metrolinx’s commitment to ensuring property owners and tenants would not experience a financial loss,⁴ many business owners that were interviewed for this study stated that they were unable to relocate within the neighbourhood. Instead, they were forced to relocate or, in some cases, shut down. While some residents acknowledged there will be benefits to having greater access to subway service in the future, our findings reveal that it is a stressful ordeal for many owners, tenants, and community members. Many of the community’s residents and establishments opposed Metrolinx’s decision to locate the MSF in Thorncliffe Park and stated that the community’s failed efforts to advocate for their community reflect the neighbourhood’s disadvantaged social and economic status.

Our engagement revealed that disruption in the neighbourhood is already having immediate impacts and is expected to have long-term consequences for the vitality of the neighbourhood’s business community. By the time this report is published, most, if not all, establishments currently within the MSF site will have been displaced.

3 Metrolinx. (2021, May). Thorncliffe Park Community Table – MSF Site Selection.

4 Metrolinx. (2023). Property and Transit Construction – Acquiring and accessing property.

Study objectives

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the impacts of significant infrastructure investments on the vitality of local communities. Focusing on Thorncliffe Park as a case study, CUI sought to understand the impacts of Ontario Line construction on the vitality of establishments and identify the mitigation supports needed to ensure their survival through the multi-year construction process.

Community engagement revealed the direct impact of the Ontario Line on the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood. We also conducted a scan of municipal construction mitigation initiatives in Canada and the United States and considered the accessibility of the City's existing business supports.

The objectives of this report are to:

- **better understand the impact of Ontario Line construction** on the vitality of Thorncliffe Park's establishments;
- **summarize and communicate the direct experiences** of local business owners, tenants, and community members;
- **highlight applicable municipal construction mitigation initiatives;** and
- **propose initiatives for the City to introduce equitable mitigation supports** for establishments facing construction disruptions.

The purpose of this inquiry was to understand the impacts of significant infrastructure investments on the vitality of local communities.

Methodology and study area

Project Process: May - December 2023



Figure 6: Project Process, May - December 2023

Initial activities: Field visit and comparative research

At the beginning of June 2023, a CUI staff member who grew up in Thorncliffe Park took the CUI team on a tour. We visited the East York Town Centre shopping mall and the strip mall at 2 Thorncliffe Park Drive – the latter of which is the epicentre of the business community hub to be displaced by the subway maintenance and storage facility (MSF).

Following this initial field visit, we conducted a media scan to understand the community’s response to Metrolinx’s decision to locate the MSF in Thorncliffe Park. We also looked at Metrolinx’s approach to construction mitigation. Finally, we conducted a scan for best practices in cities across Canada and the United States, and for existing city-administered business support programs and financial incentives. We then identified models that can be applied in Toronto.

Defining the study area

Our study focused on the establishments southeast of the railway within and adjacent to the site of the MSF and the future Thorncliffe Park subway station, as show in Figure 7.

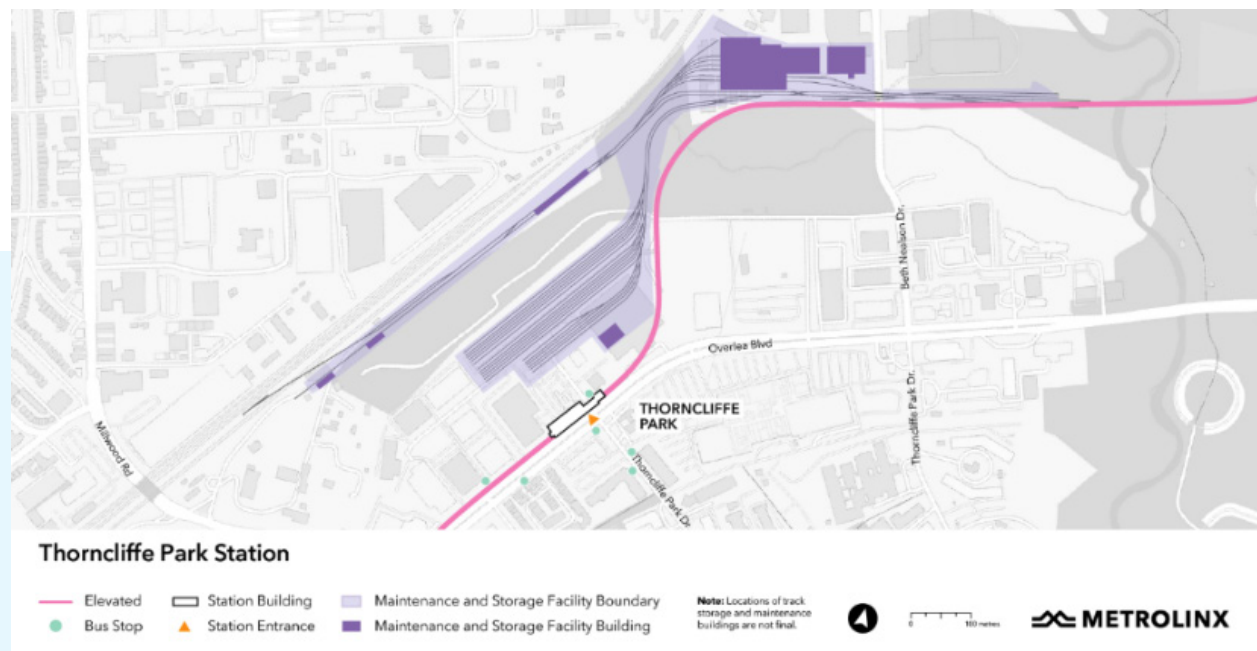


Figure 7: Thorncliffe Park Station and MSF Area Map
Metrolinx, 2022

Based on the area map, we delineated the study area to capture establishments in the southern half of the neighbourhood, organized by their alignment with and proximity to the Ontario Line sites in Figure 8. They include:

- **A Displacement Area**, with those establishments on the MSF site and Thorncliffe Park Station;
- **East and West Disruption Areas**, with those establishments located north of Overlea Boulevard adjacent to the MSF site and Thorncliffe Park Station; and
- **The Town Centre Area**, with those establishments located south of Overlea Boulevard including the shopping mall, plazas, and R.V. Burgess Park (the site of outdoor merchant programs).

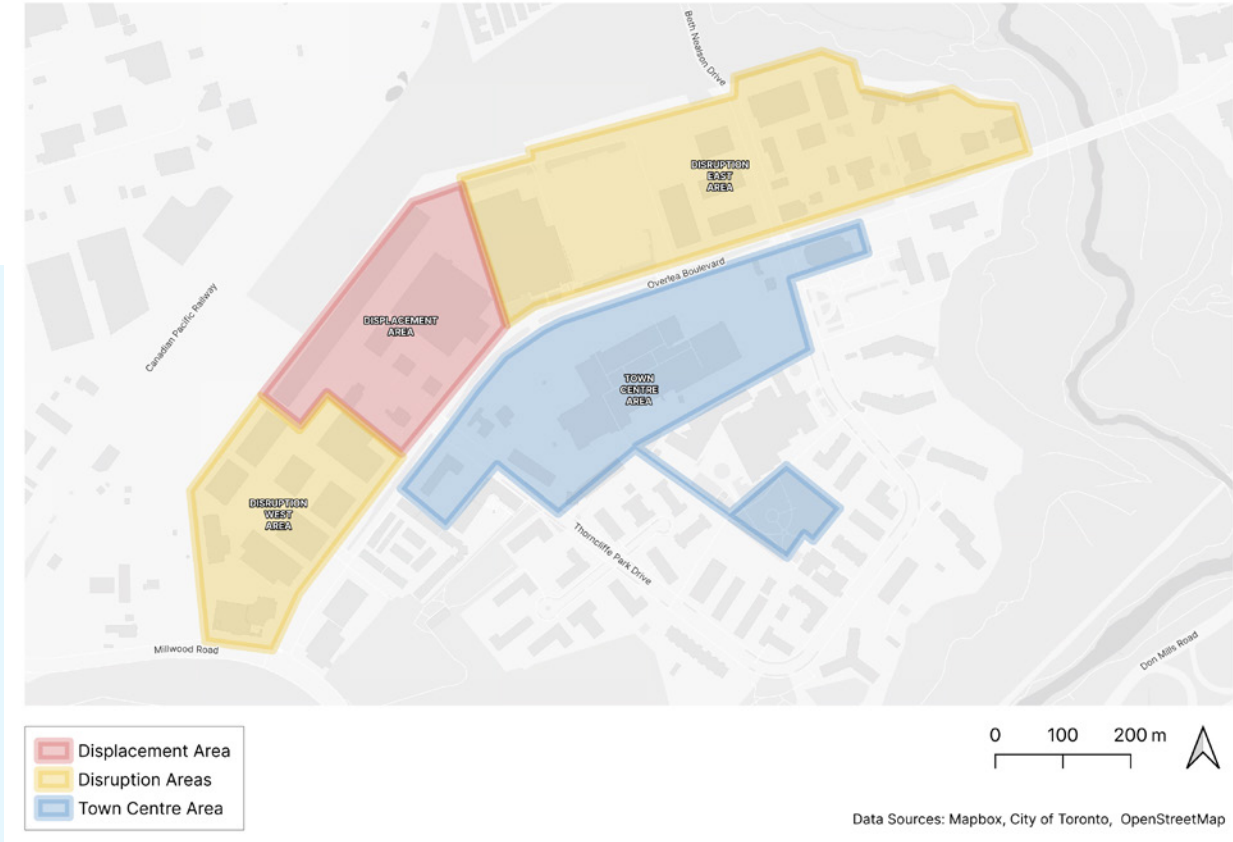


Figure 8: Thorncliffe Park Study Areas Map



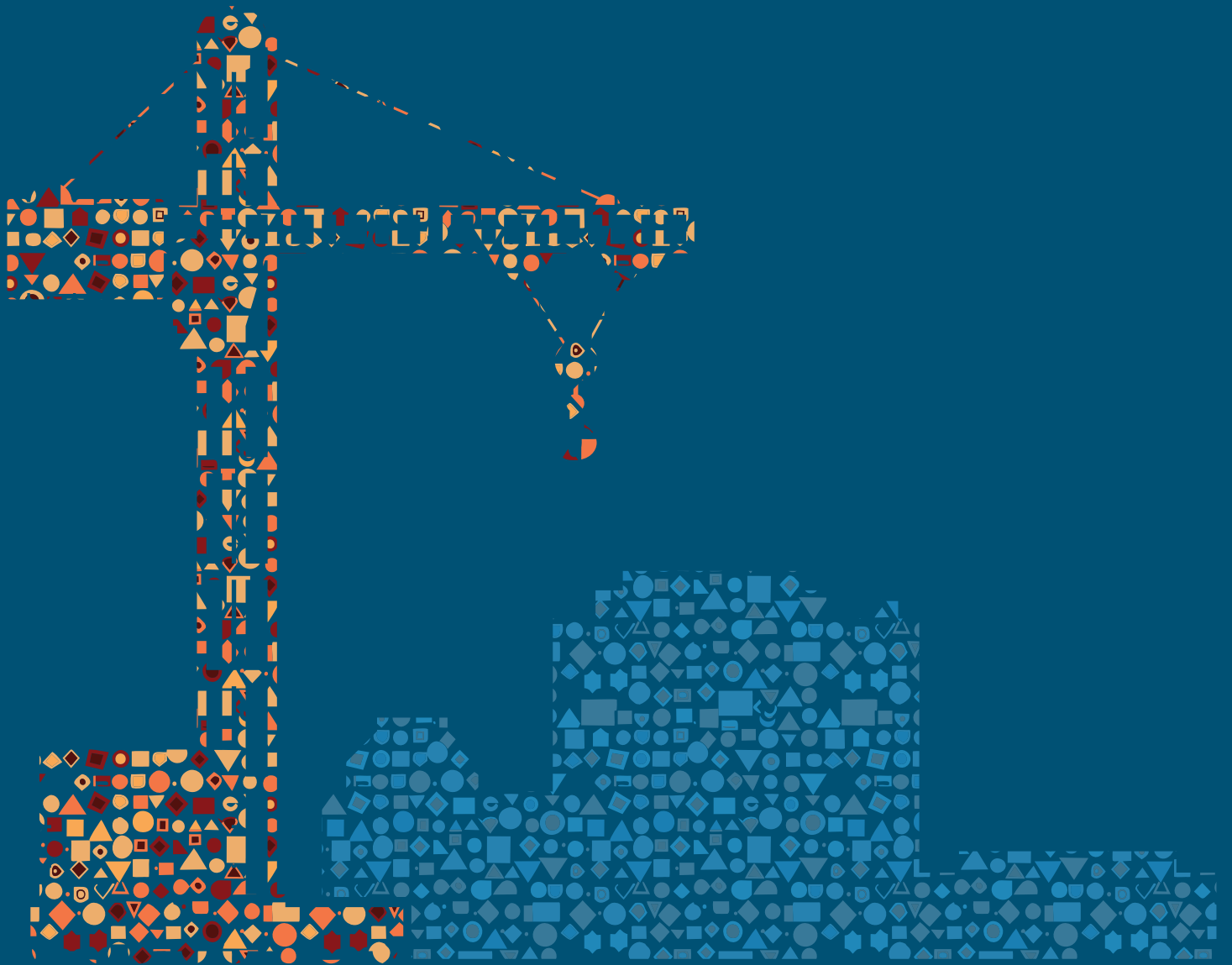
Engagement activities

We reached out to key local organizations in the neighbourhood throughout June and July 2023. This was followed by in-person business community outreach and interviews during August and September 2023 (see [Appendix A](#)).

Draft initiatives, revisions, and final report

We synthesized our findings from the interviews, and combined with a summary of our comparative research, we developed a set of draft initiatives for the City to review. We presented our findings to representatives from the City's Economic Development and Culture Division (the Toronto Main Street Recovery and Rebuild Initiative and BIA Office) on October 3, 2023 and November 3, 2023.

Based on the feedback from City staff, we conducted further research to refine our proposed initiatives. This report was finalized and submitted to the City on December 15, 2023.



Proposed Construction Mitigation Initiatives

Proposed Construction Mitigation Initiatives

The following proposed initiatives are informed by our interviews with establishment owners, tenants, and staff in Thorncliffe Park. The initiatives highlight necessary construction mitigation supports needed by establishments across the city, and in Thorncliffe Park. We also identify planning tools the City can apply to ensure that Thorncliffe Park’s residents benefit from growth and development spurred by the Ontario Line subway connection.

While we recommend that the City support the establishment of a formal Business Improvement Area (BIA) in Thorncliffe Park, access to construction mitigation supports should not be predicated on the existence of a BIA. The identified supports should be offered city-wide for any small business or establishment impacted by major transit infrastructure construction.

The City faces an estimated operating budget shortfall of \$1.5 billion for 2024⁵ and has limited financial tools for generating additional revenue. Implementing most of these initiatives will be dependent on the willingness of Metrolinx and the Government of Ontario to provide additional funding to the City of Toronto.

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5 As presented by City staff during a virtual budget consultation meeting held on November 23, 2023. The City’s financial environment has worsened significantly due to the sustained impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation and increased costs, increased interest rates and cost of borrowing, and its transit expansion obligations.



City-Wide Initiatives

To provide the necessary direct-to-establishment supports identified by CUI's best practice research, the City of Toronto should consider the following initiatives:

- **Authorize a city-wide “Transit Construction Mitigation” Community Improvement Plan** that defines areas around major transit expansion project sites. This plan will provide direct financial supports for small establishments impacted by construction disruptions. Supports should include:
 - grants and forgivable loans to cover the cost of physical relocation, including moving expenses, operating expenses, equipment improvements, site improvements at the new location, and differences in rent;
 - business interruption payments for businesses suffering significant revenue losses;
 - other financial assistance, such as waiving municipal development, permit, and licence fees; and
 - technical assistance in accessing both existing and proposed supports.
- **Authorize an expedited permit and licence approvals process for establishments** seeking to relocate due to transit expansion property acquisition or construction disruption impacts on operation.

To better support establishments facing construction disruptions, City staff should:

- **Onboard dedicated municipal staff and trusted local organizations to provide communication and support channels**, including but not limited to activities such as:
 - a full-time telephone hotline;
 - door-to-door and virtual canvassing;
 - one-on-one meetings to identify unique needs and concerns;
 - in-person and virtual community workshops; and
 - a publicity campaign for available financial and non-financial business support programs.
- **Develop training programs** to support establishments, including handout materials with construction mitigation guidance in multiple languages.
- **Create an “Open for Business Wayfinding Signage” business support program** to increase the visibility of establishments through construction disruptions.
- **Clarify timelines with Metrolinx and construction contractors**, including scheduled construction phases and traffic disruptions. Use these timelines to generate accurate and accessible notices. This includes gaining clarity on Metrolinx’s plans for recently acquired commercial properties adjacent to Ontario Line infrastructure sites.
- **Create a municipal liaison position** to provide a navigation service with the purpose of aiding relocating establishments to prepare applications for permitting and licensing.

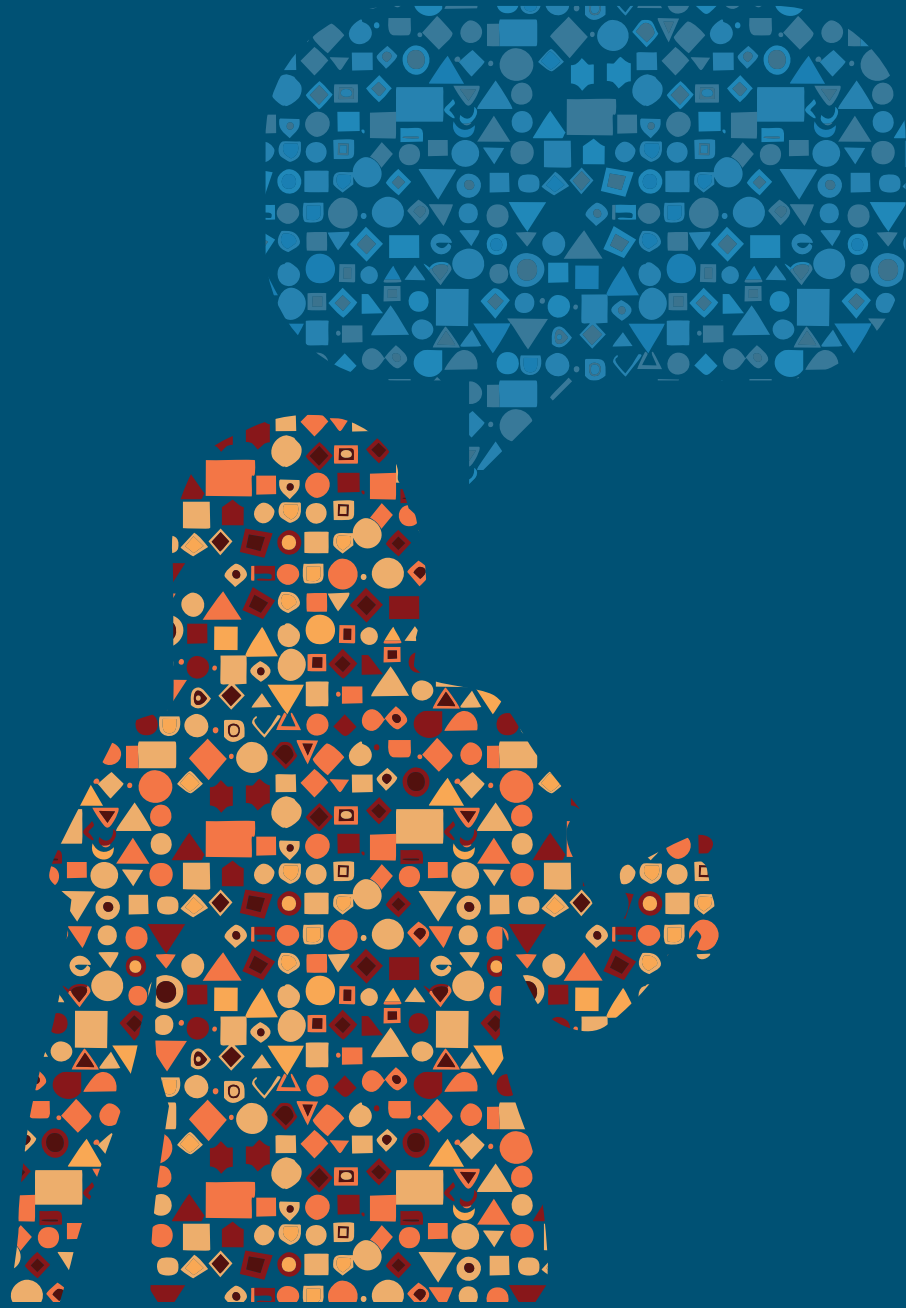
Thorncliffe Park-Specific Initiatives

To support Thorncliffe Park’s establishments in gaining access to available business supports, City staff should:

- **Conduct a municipally-led education initiative** about the benefits of establishing a Business Improvement Area for the Thorncliffe Park area.

To ensure that Thorncliffe Park’s diverse communities benefit from growth and development spurred by the new Ontario Line connection, City staff should:

- **Conduct a secondary planning study** into the feasibility of creating a Thorncliffe Park Secondary Plan, to ensure that growth and development influenced by Ontario Line infrastructure investment reflects a land use vision as determined through co-design with the neighbourhood’s diverse communities.
- **Conduct a Thorncliffe Park Community Services and Facilities Study** with an evidence-based approach to support the current and future social and civic infrastructure needs of the neighbourhood.



What We Learned Through Engagement

What We Learned Through Engagement

The following is a summary of our engagement with establishment owners and tenants, and community members, in Thorncliffe Park, combined with the observations of CUI’s researchers.⁶

Soon-to-be displaced owners want to remain in Thorncliffe Park

Although the deadline to vacate properties acquired by Metrolinx is December 2023, we observed that neighbourhood businesses were already displaced. We saw vacant storefronts north of Overlea Boulevard, many with signs in the windows noting new addresses, one as far away as Richmond Hill.

Over time, small businesses have built their customer base through targeted local marketing and word of mouth. Several owners stated that they never intended to leave the neighbourhood and had gone to great personal expense to establish their businesses, even through the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, many establishments soon-to-be displaced are unable to find suitable locations with comparable rents within the neighbourhood, forcing them to look beyond their established customer base.

One such example is the building at 1 Thorncliffe Park Drive—home to co-located service providers that support the neighbourhood’s immigrant and refugee communities. Services include immigration consultation, passport photography, remittance, printing, real estate, and shipping. The building is also in the Displacement Area and will be forced to close, seen as a huge loss by the community.

Several owners stated that they never intended to leave the neighbourhood and had gone to great personal expense to establish their businesses, even through the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁶ Feedback was anonymized to protect the identities of interviewees. This exercise was inherently qualitative in nature. Additional study and engagement are necessary to reflect the ongoing impacts of Ontario Line construction.

Forced relocation may be the end of many local small businesses and non-profits

For many tenant establishments soon to be displaced, their current leasing agreements are significantly more affordable than new leases. Relocation would incur a substantial market rent increase that many cannot afford. For service providers, this may result in a fee increase for services provided, market share loss, the downsizing of employees, or indefinite shut down. This risk has become a major source of stress for several owners.

Additionally, many business owners and service providers will need to take on the necessary expense of two advertising campaigns, one directing their previous customers to their new location, and another targeted at building a new local customer base. We also heard about difficulty navigating municipal permitting and licensing approvals for demolition, construction, and signage in a timely manner.

For those who have found a new location, we heard that new locations often require renovations, which requires reserve funding that many do not have.

Interviewees identified these consequences as major stressors. Many asked for, at minimum, commercial rent support.





Construction impediments reduce access to establishments

The Thorncliffe Park study area is only accessible by vehicle through two points of entry at the ends of its main thoroughfare, Overlea Boulevard, via Leaside Drive in the west and Don Mills Road in the east. Across the board, we heard about increased commute times and traffic delays due to construction along Overlea, and that construction north Thorncliffe Park Drive impedes shipping and vehicular access into Banigan Road (in the West Disruption Area). Finally, road debris from construction works presents serious obstacles for pedestrians, especially seniors, those with mobility devices, and parents with strollers.

Several owners and staff told us that since construction began, their walk-in traffic has dropped off and, overall, their customer bases shrunk because customers prefer to avoid the congestion. For one restaurant in the East Disruption Area, we heard that typically busy weekday lunch hour rushes have “died” as office workers from the Don Mills-Eglinton area do not have time during limited lunch hours to navigate around construction.

One store manager attempted to post unpermitted wayfinding signs along Overlea Boulevard and was quickly ordered to take them down. The manager suggested that a little inexpensive marketing to increase visibility and direct customers would be a great help.

United representation is lacking among business establishments

The lack of a BIA or similar business association in Thorncliffe Park leaves establishments without a unified voice to communicate challenges to the City, or to access municipal funding programs for construction mitigation, placemaking and programming initiatives, façade and streetscape improvements, and district-level marketing strategies.

The lack of advocacy for the business interests of the neighbourhood has left establishments widely disadvantaged. We heard about disjointed efforts to secure mitigation supports from Metrolinx. Establishments hired separate legal teams for negotiations, resulting in different outcomes. We also heard about divisions within the study area's business communities, between those who are benefiting from negotiations with Metrolinx and those who are not.

There is a sense of unfairness in Metrolinx's approach to construction mitigation

Construction mitigation in Thorncliffe Park is limited to properties undergoing acquisition. Metrolinx prefers one-on-one negotiation, and failing negotiation, uses expropriation to secure properties within the site of the MSF and Thorncliffe Park Station. Negotiations with many establishments are currently ongoing.

Local establishments consistently expressed frustration and dismay about the lack of transparency in dealing with Metrolinx. As a result, there were wildly differing reports about the levels of negotiation support, compensation, pay-outs, and even non-disclosure agreements. In the Displacement Area, one interviewee stated that Metrolinx was providing their business "fair compensation" covering all the additional costs of relocation that would not have occurred otherwise, including moving costs, rent differential, construction costs, and lawyer fees. Another stated Metrolinx would only cover the cost of their current lease for one year and did not offer to help them find a new location or with any rent increase because of relocation. Again, the lack of a transparent and easily understood process left the neighbourhood to fill in the gaps with conjecture, speculation, and growing resentment.

For establishments in the West Disruption Area, Metrolinx is now the owner of properties and acting as landlord for the commercial tenants. For one establishment looking to expand their operations over the long term, the owner expressed personal stress over a lack of clear communication on the future of the building and surrounding lots. Another interviewee representing an establishment in a different unit of the same building echoed this uncertainty.



Inadequate engagement with the City of Toronto

Most interviewees were not aware of any available municipal supports. Their interactions with the City were limited to compliance permits and COVID-19 public health regulations.

One interviewee expressed that the City Planning Division could have played a greater role in consulting and advocating for Thorncliffe Park's establishments and residents. According to them, their personal effort to advocate for the concerns of the community culminated in one conversation with the local councillor, an item on the Council agenda at a single meeting, and nothing beyond that. They felt that there was a lack of coordination between the City and Metrolinx, and that the neighbourhood's social and economic disadvantage hampered the community's ability to advocate effectively with either level of government. They called for the City Planning Division to meaningfully engage the community and advocate on its behalf to "usher the rebuild" in the wake of Ontario Line construction.

There are gaps in meeting community needs

Several interviewees called for an expansion of recreational and civic amenities to serve the population-dense neighbourhood. The community has long outgrown the Jenner Jean-Marie Community Centre, located in the lower level of the Toronto Public Library's Thorncliffe branch. With the neighbourhood's high youth population, one interviewee called for more places for youth to gather.

Interviewees asked for other commitments. One interviewee suggested adding pedestrian crosswalks to Overlea Boulevard because intersections are few and far between. Another called for prioritized wintertime snow clearing of sidewalks to ensure the safety of those that rely on walking and mobility aids. Several interviewees identified that simple streetscape improvements, such as providing more benches for seniors, would go a long way toward ensuring a more welcoming environment.



Construction Mitigation Research Summary

Construction Mitigation Research Summary

The following section summarizes our comparative research on best practices for managing construction impacts among jurisdictions in Canada and the United States. The initiatives described below provide examples that can be implemented in Toronto to better support establishments facing construction disruptions from major transit infrastructure projects.

Direct-to-business financial support programs

A 2018 Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) membership survey received responses from 5,573 small businesses. When asked whether their business had been disrupted by local construction projects during the five years prior to the survey period, 41 percent responded yes, with five percent indicating major disruption. Of the 2,135 responses reporting disruptions, 46 percent experienced decreased sales, 23 percent suffered personal stress, 21 percent had to draw from business or personal savings, and seven percent considered closing or relocating.⁷

CFIB recommends the creation of a municipal compensation program “for cases where construction has a moderate to major impact, for an extended period, on the operations of local businesses.”⁸ See [Appendix B](#) for more information on this report.

A 2013 PolicyLink study highlighted successful strategies used in Seattle, Washington and St. Paul, Minnesota to help businesses not only survive, but thrive, through light rail and bus rapid transit construction.

The study found that grant payments and forgivable loans are often more effective than traditional loan products for businesses facing significant revenue losses.⁹ See [Appendix C](#) for more details on this study.

7 Canadian Federation of Independent Business. (2018, May). *Paving a Smoother Road: Helping small businesses survive infrastructure work.*

8 Ibid.

9 PolicyLink. (2013, November). *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects.*

City examples



Montréal, Quebec

Financial assistance for business in areas affected by major construction work

The City of Montréal provides two forms of direct financial support for eligible merchants while major infrastructure work takes place near their establishment, including for transit expansion lasting at least six months. This includes funding up to \$40,000 per fiscal year¹⁰ and a flat-rate subsidy in the form of a lump sum of \$5,000.¹¹ Eligible areas are designated by the City's Executive Committee.

Businesses providing retail sales, product rentals, or consumer services (barring some exclusions) already in operation in eligible areas before a transit project has begun can access either funding stream. For the flat-rate funding, businesses must demonstrate a decrease of more than 5 percent gross profit. For the lump sum, businesses do not need to demonstrate a loss of profit and is available to them until the program is fully subscribed.



Seattle, Washington

Rainier Valley Community Development Fund

In the mid-1990s, the regional transit authority (Sound Transit), began to plan the construction of a light rail transit (LRT) line along a 4.3 mile corridor. Construction would impact roughly 300 businesses; 72 percent owned by people of colour and employing between 2,500 to 3,000 people.¹² In response to community concerns over the at-grade alignment and a lawsuit to construct the line underground, a US\$50 million Rainier Valley Community Development Fund was created to address both the construction and long-term impacts.¹³

10 City of Montréal. (2023, September 29). *Financial assistance: businesses in areas affected by major construction work.*

11 City of Montréal. (2023, September 29). *Flat-rate subsidy for businesses in areas affected by major construction.*

12 PolicyLink. (2013, November). *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects.*

13 Black, Charleete M. (n.d.). *RVCDF Supplemental Mitigation Program Results.*

The City of Seattle, King County, and Sound Transit contributed to the fund, which provided:

- re-establishment payments, available to businesses that were forced to physically relocate, as non-repayable grants covering moving expenses, site improvements at the new location, and up to 24 months' rent;
- business interruption payments, available to compensate businesses on the corridor for loss of sales due to construction impacts;
- working capital advances to cover operating expenses for businesses; and
- equipment and tenant improvement advances covering expenses related to relocation.¹⁴

By the end of the construction period in 2009, the retention rate was 85 percent for all businesses, and 90 percent for those who received assistance. The ethnic mix of business owners was also maintained.¹⁵



St. Paul, Minnesota Ready for Rail Business Support Fund

In mid-2010, construction began for the 11-mile Green Line LRT connecting downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul (the “Twin Cities”), also known as the Central Corridor. A survey found that 20 percent of business owners were African American or Black immigrants, 18 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders, and three-quarters of businesses had less than ten employees.¹⁶

A lawsuit led to a 2011 federal court decision that found that the initial Environment Impact Review for the LRT failed to address the negative impacts to business revenues due to construction. At the time of this decision, the regional planning agency (the Metropolitan Council), the Cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, and community partners had developed several programs and resources to support local businesses through construction.¹⁷

14 Krieg, Alex. (2009). Results of the *Supplemental Mitigation Assistance Program on Businesses Impacted by Light Rail Construction in the Rainier Valley*. University of Florida.

15 Ibid. See the paper for a full breakdown of the distribution of the fund.

16 Warren, C., Pittman, B., and Shelton, E. (2012). *Mitigating business losses: services, strategies, and effectiveness*. Wilder Research.

17 PolicyLink. *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects*.

The US \$4 million Ready for Rail Business Support Fund was established in 2011 through a joint powers agreement between the Metropolitan Council and City of St. Paul (Housing and Redevelopment Authority). The fund was changed into a forgivable loan when repayable loans were deemed insufficient to meet the needs of establishments suffering significant revenue losses. It provided up to US\$20,000 to businesses that demonstrated gross sales of no more than US\$2 million and a loss of sales due to LRT construction, forgivable at a rate of 20 percent each year over a five-year period. As of November 2013, the fund supported 200 businesses (one-third of eligible businesses).¹⁸

Business outreach and technical support



Vancouver, British Columbia TransLink's Broadway Subway Project's mitigation team

For the Broadway Subway Project in Vancouver, the Government of British Columbia created a dedicated mitigation team to provide full-time support for businesses along the Broadway corridor during construction. The Translink agency team responded quickly to stakeholder feedback around access and business visibility, sidewalk improvements, and general cleanliness. The team provided street cleaning services, worked directly with stakeholders to address concerns around noise, dust, and nighttime lighting, and installed more than 80 business wayfinding signs.¹⁹



Seattle, Washington Rainier Valley Community Development Fund

Because the Fund was unable to conduct a preliminary assessment of the economic conditions of the LRT corridor prior to construction (see section above), it instead focused on outreach to the area's 300 businesses to prepare them for construction. Working with a trusted local organization, staff worked co-operatively with the local community to identify and

address businesses' concerns, and provided training to community members on product marketing, leasing, bookkeeping, legal issues, and more.²⁰

18 Ibid.

19 Government of British Columbia. (n.d.). *Broadway is open for business during construction*. Broadway Subway Project.

20 PolicyLink. *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects*.



Twin Cities, Minnesota University Avenue Business Preparation Collaborative

The Business Resource Collaborative in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul), Minnesota, is a partnership of business coalitions, non-profits, community developers, and local and regional governments that supports small businesses through the transit construction process on the Central Corridor.²¹ It established the University Avenue Business Preparation Collaborative (U7), a convention of seven trusted community development organizations in St. Paul, to provide business outreach and technical assistance.²²

U7 hired dedicated staff to provide local businesses with marketing and branding supports. Small business consultants conducted door-to-door canvassing of every small business, talking to owners about the current state of their operations and how they might prepare for the coming changes. The consultants distributed written materials in business owners' primary languages and provided one-on-one technical assistance to help them grow and remain in the area, including:

- accounting and tax filing support to ease their applications for the Ready for Rail loan program (see section above); and
- marketing support, including website design, establishing social media, collecting and using customer emails for newsletters and mailing lists, and setting up digital retail options.²³

Only 84 of 1,144 businesses closed or relocated, and 84 new businesses opened.²⁴

21 Business Resource Collaborative. (2012). *Building on the Strengths of the Central Corridor: Progress Report 2009–2012*.

22 PolicyLink. *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects*.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.



Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Support for Business Program – Participant Guidebook

The City of Milwaukee’s construction mitigation program includes three key components: community collaboration, continuous communication, and targeted business education.

The City’s Department of Public Works offers a participant guidebook detailing the components of its Support for Business program. It includes a link to online resources, content on the role of municipal community liaisons, individual contact information for key municipal and non-profit organizations, and preparation guidelines for before, during, and after construction.²⁵

25 City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works. *Support for Business Program – Participant Guidebook*.



How the City Can Support Thorncliffe Park

How the City Can Support Thorncliffe Park

The impacts of significant infrastructure projects begin long before shovels hit the ground. Municipal mitigation initiatives must begin early to prevent eroding the vitality of existing communities that projects, such as the Ontario Line, intend to benefit.

Based on our interviews with establishment owners and tenants, as well as community members, and our comparative research, we identified several priority measures that the City of Toronto can introduce to support Thorncliffe Park throughout construction, and after it is completed.

Help establish a BIA in Thorncliffe Park to allow access to available business supports

In a staff report submitted to Toronto’s Economic and Development Committee on June 21, 2022, the Interim General Manager of the Economic Development and Culture Division recommended that City Council authorize the division to establish a new Transit Expansion Construction Mitigation grant program using \$1.38 million in funding from Metrolinx. The program’s goal is to assist BIAs and businesses associations in delivering projects and providing mitigation programs to communities impacted by major transit construction projects. See Appendix D for an overview of the program.

In providing the rationale for the grant program, the Interim General Manager acknowledges that “the negative impacts of construction sometimes fall disproportionately upon retailers and other small businesses near construction zones,” and that “[s]mall businesses without the financial flexibility to rely on reserves may possibly close or relocate with the resulting effect of lost employment, vacancies and reduced vibrancy in the public realm.”²⁶ This is the case for Thorncliffe Park establishments in the Displacement and East and West Disruption Areas.

26 City of Toronto Economic Development and Culture Division (2022, June 21). *Report for Action: Authority to Receive Funding from Metrolinx for Eglinton BIAs and Introduction of a new Transit Expansion Construction Mitigation Grant Program.*



The grant program was approved by City Council and provides grants in increments of \$10,000, \$25,000, or \$50,000 to BIAs and business associations for business engagement, area marketing and branding, creative event activations, research and needs assessment, and beautification. These initiatives are useful for formally organized business communities at the district scale; but the lack of an established BIA or business association in Thorncliffe Park precludes local establishments from accessing the City’s only construction mitigation program, and other financial assistance available only to BIAs.

The City should conduct a business outreach campaign to inform establishments in Thorncliffe Park about the benefits of establishing a neighbourhood BIA.

Build trust through sustained outreach and awareness

Building trust within communities and with establishments is time and resource intensive. According to PolicyLink, U7’s annual budget included 2.5 business consultant staff, a graphic designer, a full-time project coordinator, a specialty technical assistance fund for legal and other services, plus interns and volunteers. Core staff often approached individual business owners several times before they were willing to disclose financial information. One business consultant estimated that the average business required roughly 80 hours of one-on-one assistance.²⁷

27 PolicyLink. *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects*.

We found that each establishment in Thorncliffe Park has its own needs and operates within its own unique constraints. Until a BIA or business association is established, the City should implement programs that provide support directly to business owners. Area businesses require assistance with adapting to the rapid changes that come with construction and with navigating financial assistance programs.

Beyond the Transit Expansion Construction Mitigation grant program, the City provides resources including networking events, business webinars and seminars, and online training modules to businesses. We discovered during our community outreach that many establishments in Thorncliffe Park are not aware of such programs. A concerted effort by the City to spread awareness in the neighbourhood about these programs is necessary.

Create a navigation service for establishments relocating due to construction disruptions

The City should establish a dedicated staff liaison to provide support for those businesses navigating the application and licensing processes required for relocation. Interviewees expressed particular concern about the length of time it takes to secure municipal permits and licences, especially for establishments forced to relocate when they initially had no plans to do so. A liaison providing one-to-one support could help to ensure that applications are prepared correctly and that the route through the current approvals process runs smoothly and efficiently.

The City should also create a so-called “expedited lane” modelled on the existing Gold Star Service for businesses impacted by transit construction.

Provide direct-to-business financial support

The City of Toronto Act, 2006 prohibits the City from providing direct or indirect financial assistance – grants, loans, and exemptions from levies, charges, or fees – to any industrial or commercial enterprise.²⁸ However, an exemption exists.

The provincial Planning Act includes a planning tool called a Community Improvement Plan (CIP). City Council has the authority to designate a community improvement project area within the municipal boundary of the City²⁹ for any environmental, social, or community economic development reason. A CIP would allow the City to provide grants or loans that to registered owners, assessed owners, and tenants of lands and buildings within a community improvement project area.³⁰

28 *City of Toronto Act, 2006*, SO 2006, c 11, s 82, 1.

29 *Planning Act*, RSO 1996, c P.13, s 28, 2.

30 *Planning Act*, RSO 1996, c P.13, s 28, 7.



The implementation of a CIP is the only legal means available to the City to provide direct-to-business financial supports. If a CIP is implemented and combined with the existing non-financial supports offered by the City, establishments impacted by construction disruptions would stand a better chance of surviving and seeing the benefits of higher-order transit in their communities.

Because of current post-pandemic budget deficits, it will be necessary to secure funding from the Province to implement a Transit Construction Mitigation CIP. The Planning Act allows the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, with the approval of the Lieutenant Governor General in Council, to enter into an agreement with the City of Toronto to provide funding to assist with community improvement.³¹

Think long term: Co-design place-based policies and assess needs in Thorncliffe Park

The introduction of a new Ontario Line subway station in Thorncliffe Park has the potential to bring long-term benefits to the neighbourhood, but if not managed in a manner that reflects the community's needs, it may cause significant commercial and residential displacement.

The City of Toronto's Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy (2020) designated Thorncliffe Park as a Neighbourhood Improvement Area (NIA) with the need for specific place-based policies. NIA neighbourhoods in Toronto have inequities on several indicators of well-being related to economic opportunities, social development, participation in decision-making, physical surroundings, and healthy lives.³²

³¹ *Planning Act*, RSO 1996, c P.13, s 30.

³² *Social Policy Analysis and Research*. (2014). *TSNS 2020 Neighbourhood Equity Index – Methodological Documentation*.

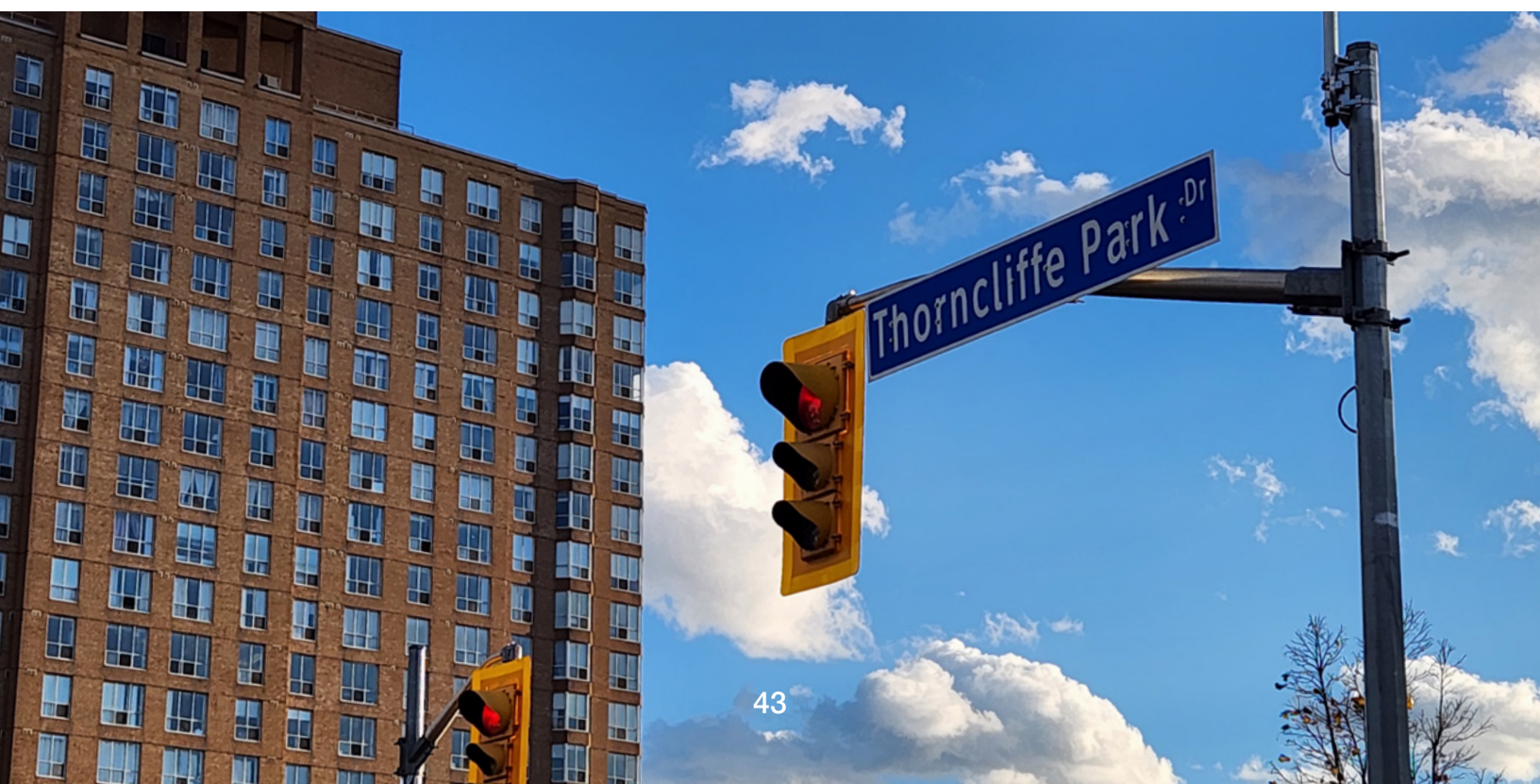
A scan of the City of Toronto's Official Plan³³ reveals that there is no secondary plan for the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood. A secondary plan typically sets out detailed local development policies to guide growth and change in a defined area.

The secondary planning process would provide Thorncliffe Park residents the opportunity to ensure that locally applied policies and regulations guide development in a manner that benefits and reflects the needs and desires of the local community. The creation of a Thorncliffe Park Secondary Plan is a necessary guide to the growth and development of the neighbourhood, both during the construction period and after the completion of the Ontario Line.

Our engagement reveals that there is significant concern within Thorncliffe Park about the capacity of existing community services and facilities to accommodate the area's growing population. These are publicly accessible, non-profit, brick-and-mortar facilities from which the City can deliver programs and services, including public libraries, childcare and recreation centres, public schools, and human services – key to supporting livable communities.³⁴ To support the creation of a new secondary plan, the City should conduct a study to ensure that essential services and facilities respond to changing needs and contributes to the completeness of the Thorncliffe Park community.

33 The City of Toronto Official Plan is a policy document guiding land use planning and growth management.

34 City Planning. (2022, April). *Jane Finch Initiative: Phase 1 Community Services and Facilities Study*. City of Toronto.



Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of Project Engagement Activities

We reached out to key local organizations in the neighbourhood throughout June and July 2023 to gain a better understanding of local contexts in Thorncliffe Park. This was followed by in-person business community outreach and interviews over the course of August and September 2023.

Door-to-door outreach and interviews were conducted on the following dates:

- Friday, August 4
- Wednesday, August 9
- Friday, August 18
- Monday, September 11
- Wednesday, September 13

Attempted to connect with: 72 establishments

Interviewed 29 individuals representing 27 establishments: 18 commercial, 2 industrial, 7 institutional

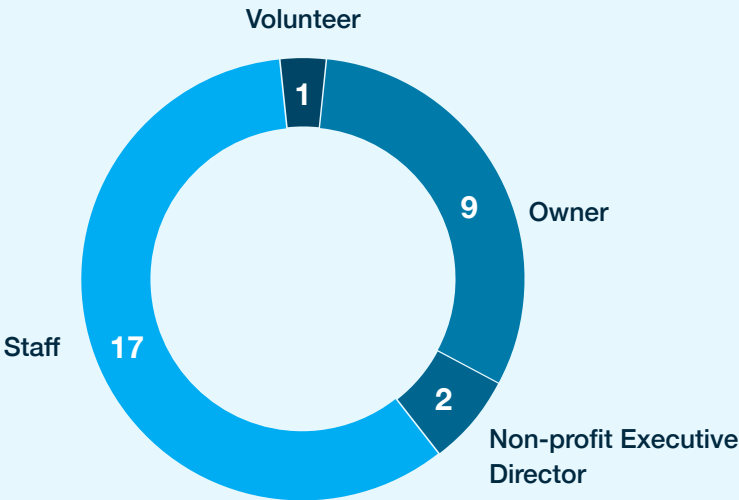


Figure A1: Interviewees by Position

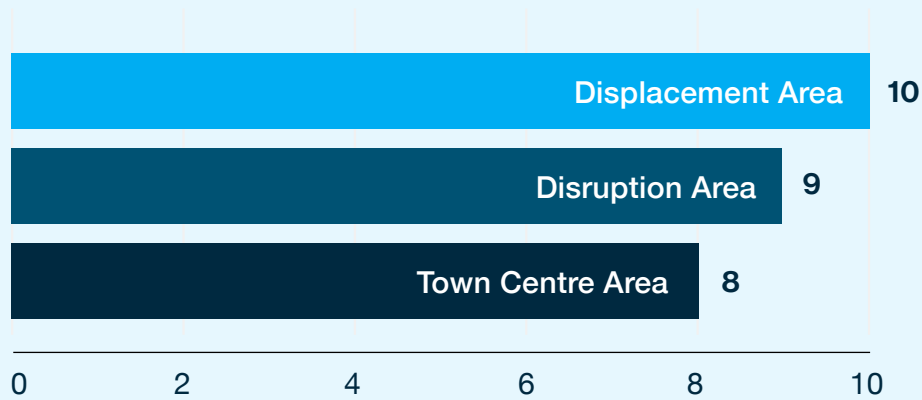


Figure A2: Interviewees by Area

Interview Questions

General questions:

- Has Ontario Line construction impacted your establishment? If so, how?
- How is your establishment adapting to construction disruptions? What are the challenges? What kind of supports are necessary?
- Has your establishment taken advantage of any available City of Toronto business support programs? Are you aware of any programs?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving business and/or community vitality in the neighbourhood?

Displacement Area and East and West Disruption Areas question:

- What types of mitigation supports has your establishment been able to secure in negotiations with Metrolinx?

Interview lengths ranged between five to 45 minutes, depending on the interviewees' availability and interest. Interviews were conducted during regular business hours. Concerns and identified impacts differed depending on proximity to Ontario Line sites. Levels of detail shared regarding operations and construction adaptation efforts depended on whether the interviewee was an owner or staff (see Figures A1 and A2).

Appendix B: CFIB's Five Key Elements for Mitigating Construction Impacts

A report by the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses (CFIB) conducted a survey of small businesses and a jurisdictional scan of municipalities across Canada and the world to determine best practices related to construction mitigation. The report, *Paving a Smoother Road: Helping small businesses survive infrastructure work*, was published in May 2018

CFIB recommends that Canadian municipalities should adopt a construction mitigation policy that includes five key elements to help ease the negative impacts of construction on small businesses:

- A compensation program for cases where construction has a moderate to major impact, for an extended period, on the operations of local businesses. It should be easy to understand and access, involve significant and timely monetary compensation (daily amount, tax break or other) and be financed by factoring in its costs in the budget of each project;
- A no surprise rule mandating the municipality to track its infrastructure's condition and let local businesses know of construction well in advance. A good way for cities to do that is to have a state of the infrastructure report, a 5-year capital investment plan and relevant pre-construction consultation with all impacted businesses;
- A comprehensive planning approach involving the “dig once” principle and the phasing/timing of projects;
- An improved contracting process with integrated mitigation provisions and a bonus/penalty system, especially for early/late completion of the project; and
- A business liaison officer with managerial authority designated for each project.³⁵

35 Canadian Federation of Independent Business. (2018, May). *Paving a Smoother Road: Helping small businesses survive infrastructure work*.

Appendix C: PolicyLink's Emergent Best Practices

PolicyLink, an American equity-focused non-profit institute, prepared a 2013 report titled Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects for the Oakland Sustainable Neighbourhoods initiative. The authors noted that, “Ultimately, the success of a new transit line is dependent on the success of these [local and diverse] businesses to serve as destinations for riders, provide employment opportunities, and maintain the cultural fabric of the different neighbourhoods and communities.”³⁶ The report highlights successful strategies used in Seattle, Washington, and St. Paul, Minnesota, to help businesses survive and thrive through light rail and bus rapid transit construction.

Emergent best practices identified by PolicyLink based on American examples:

- The right type of financial assistance must be available to meet business's needs. If the businesses are facing significant revenue losses, grant payments or forgivable loans are often a more effective strategy than traditional loan products.
- Outreach to businesses should begin well in advance of construction, ideally a year before or more, and needs to be done by trusted community partners who can be honest about impacts, but also help business owners see the vision of the project and have hope for the future.
- Business technical assistance is vital to help businesses take advantage of the financial assistance programs that are put in place, as well as strengthen the business overall to prepare them for the long-term changes to the neighbourhood.
- Projects can have unpredictable timelines, so flexibility, trust, and constant communication are key to ensuring businesses know what to expect.
- Strong advocacy and organizing by multiple partners, including the small business community, community-based organizations, and community development corporations, is essential to developing a strategy that will work for businesses and their community.
- In both Seattle and St. Paul, the cities played an important leadership role in ensuring appropriate business impact mitigations were in place.³⁷

³⁶ PolicyLink. (2013, November). *Business Impact Mitigations for Transit Projects*.

³⁷ Ibid.

Appendix D: Toronto’s Construction Mitigation Grant Program

In 2022, City Council authorized a new Transit Expansion Construction Mitigation grant program using \$1.38 million in funding from Metrolinx. The program would assist BIAs and businesses associations by providing mitigation programs to communities impacted by major transit construction projects (see Table D1, below).

Table D1: Transit Expansion Construction Mitigation Grant Program³⁸

Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides funding for community-driven initiatives that mitigate the impacts of construction on local businesses.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Support local businesses impacted by major construction works. ▪ Encourage the development and testing of innovative and effective construction mitigation strategies and expand their use across the City of Toronto. ▪ Pilot and showcase innovative, scalable construction mitigation solutions to challenges faced by BIAs and local businesses.
Eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Toronto BIAs ▪ Not-for-profit organizations including business associations and registered charities with strong local business involvement
Eligible initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Business engagement ▪ Area marketing and branding ▪ Creative event activations ▪ Research and needs assessment ▪ Beautification
Funding amount	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Grants are available in increments of \$10,000, \$25,000, and \$50,000 for projects that meet eligibility requirements.

38 City of Toronto. (n.d.). *Transit Expansion Construction Mitigation Grant Program*. <https://www.toronto.ca/business-economy/business-operation-growth/business-incentives/construction-mitigation-grant-program/>

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