

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Extreme makeover for John St.

Business group proposes to turn seedy entertainment district into a chic neighbourhood

Tenille Bonoguroe

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail, Friday, Jun. 19, 2009 03:42AM EDT

The ugly duckling of Toronto's Entertainment District is poised to become a swan.

Under a massive makeover plan to be launched Tuesday by the local Business Improvement Area, John Street would be turned into a promenade linking five of six planned "character precincts" and creating a new north-south spine for a neighbourhood that is best known today for its rowdy Richmond Street club zone.

"A much more mature and sophisticated neighbourhood is evolving," said Councillor Adam Vaughan (Ward 20, Trinity-Spadina). "This reprograms the neighbourhood to operate differently. ... It's got sort of an old-town feel to it."

The revival of John Street is part of a district renewal plan that promotes tree-lined avenues, shopping mews, widened sidewalks and a public park at Metro Square to rival Bryant Park in New York.

In Jenny Luong's opinion, anything would be an improvement on the gritty, treeless, vomit-stained street that is home to her hair salon, Salonhaus.

"If you put more trees, more people will come up here. It will bring the area up," she said of John Street, north of Queen West. "When it looks better, it makes people more excited to come. Like Quebec, you feel really cute and safe."

Sweeping from its base at the CN Tower up to the grounds of the Ontario College of Art and Design, John Street is a largely utilitarian stretch of broken pavement, parking lots, chain restaurants and media company headquarters.

The master plan would make fixing up John Street the key public priority for the Entertainment District, whose approximate boundaries are the waterfront to the south, Spadina Avenue to the west, Queen Street to the north and the financial district to the east.

"The promenade has the potential to make the greatest and most profound positive impact for the area," reads the master plan, to be launched outside Metro Hall Tuesday morning.

With a narrowed roadway and widened sidewalks, the street would be full of public art, and easily closed to vehicles for special events and festivals.

Reba Plummer, from Urbane Cyclist at the north end of John Street, was quick to fend off any suggestion that such a move would exacerbate Toronto's "war on the car."

"It can't be bikes versus cars versus pedestrians versus transit," Ms. Plummer said. "All of those components have to be in together. It would be great."

To the east, the master plan features a redesign of Roy Thomson Hall that would extend the reflecting pool and turn it into a skating rink during winter, and include an outdoor amphitheatre.

The north end's brick-and-beam buildings would be protected to form a Warehouse Precinct, while historic thoroughfares like Queen West would remain low-rise in order to protect their "main street charm," the plan states.

It took 10 months for the Master Plan Advisory Committee – chaired by Allied Properties CEO Michael Emory – to create the 72-page proposal, drawing on information and opinions offered during stakeholder focus groups, Web surveys and a "visioning workshop."

While there's no timeline attached to making the glossy plan a reality, Entertainment District BIA executive director Janice Solomon said its release provides a shared vision toward which council, developers and businesses can now work.

"It really is a long-term strategy," Ms. Solomon said. "Patience is a virtue, because now I think we're going to get it right."

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.