



THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

July 9, 2011

For city builders, there's a new model in town

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail

When progressive councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam wanted plans drawn up for a revitalized Yonge Street, she didn't ask Rob Ford's city hall for cash. She went straight to the local businesses

At a meeting at City Hall earlier this year, rookie councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam asked for the money to fund a new vision for a stagnant strip of Yonge Street between Dundas and Gerrard.

She had been representing Ward 27 for less than two months at the time of the January tête-à-tête, but the group she asked for money did not include the city's new mayor, Rob Ford, or any of her fellow council members. Seated at the table were members of the Downtown Yonge BIA, the administration of the Yonge Street Mission and Ryerson University, and Yonge Street property owners Ken Rutherford, Arron Barberian and the Lalani family.

"I said, 'Before you leave, I'm going to need some cash,'" she recalled this week. "I know if I want to get something done in the current administration, I'm going to have to get it done myself."

On Wednesday, she unveiled the result of her efforts: a bold Yonge Street master plan created by urban planner Ken Greenberg and the architecture firm KPMB, which was paid for entirely by the private sector.

In a time when the city's mayor has made his distaste for spending public money abundantly clear, she has also demonstrated a new model for Toronto urban planning, one that takes City Hall almost entirely out of the equation. And she may be playing right into Rob Ford's hands.

Ms. Wong-Tam's proposal comes just months after the completion of a beautified Bloor Street, a \$24-million makeover that was paid for by local businesses.

Across the city, neighbourhoods seeking similar improvements are doing an end-run around the Ford administration, funding their own planning documents and approaching other levels of government for support.

A \$50-million project aimed at revitalizing John Street has already seen about \$10-million designated by the city from Section 37 public-realm enhancements collected from the area's developers. The Entertainment District BIA is talking with the provincial ministry of culture and tourism as well as the federal government in an effort to solicit the rest, and one of the planners involved said they don't expect the city to cough up another cent.

Ryerson University has hired a Montreal-based planning firm to create its own master plan, while Waterfront Toronto, an agency empowered by a 25-year-mandate of autonomy, continues its work on the Lakeshore and in the West Don Lands.

"The fact of the matter is that the city is not taking this kind of project on, they're not doing these visioning strategies and they don't have the resources or the staff or the time," said urban planner Harold Madi. "So the BIAs can either sit back and suffer, or they can do something about it."

Al Rezoski is the city's acting manager of community planning, downtown section, which has only eight planners on staff to deal with an unprecedented degree of development.

"I think people are correct that we often don't have the resources or the staff to devote to these projects," he said. "We don't always have the ability to do things in house."

His department has just been directed to do another study of Yonge Street, from College to Bloor, adding to their already overwhelming list of tasks.

"It's often of assistance to us when a councillor or a developer can come forward and do a study," he said. "If you look at pre- and post-amalgamation, we're significantly below the ratio of what we used to have in terms of staff. So yeah, we're challenged in trying to meet timelines and there's high expectations out there, as there should be."

Increasingly, those expectations are being met with the aid of consultants.

Mr. Rezoski said the city's PATH master plan has been farmed out to a consultant, Urban Strategies.

And The Planning Partnership, where Mr. Madi works, has seen similar projects become a core element of their business.

The company recently completed the vision for the John Street corridor, part of a proposal by the Entertainment District BIA. In 2001, Mr. Madi authored the first master plan commissioned by a Toronto BIA, at the request of the property owners of Bloor-Yorkville, a document that included a radical street-scaping strategy.

"That was the first time a BIA had ever taken on an initiative like that," he said. "We basically mimicked everything the city would do, except it wasn't led or paid for by the city."

On Yonge Street, Ms. Wong-Tam is attempting to find middle ground. She has involved city staff from the get-go, and members of the planning department, TTC and parking authority attended her January meeting. But she has accelerated the process dramatically by having the plan itself drawn up by Mr. Greenberg and KPMB and having business owners kick in the former's \$40,000-fee.

"I understand that the mayor ran on a plan of fiscal austerity and that there isn't a lot of money, but you have a street that represents Toronto's face to the world," she said.

City planning staff is currently vetting her proposal, which will be voted on by council in the fall. To make the idea go down as easy as possible, she is not asking for a firm yes or no on the whole project from her council colleagues, but simply asking them to approve a trial period that would see the new street format created through temporary landscaping.

Her idea, and how it was produced, should present an interesting conundrum to the current mayor. On one hand, it calls for the reduction of car traffic on the midtown artery, reducing a section of Yonge to just two lanes. It will be presented to council just one month after another councillor, Denzil Minnan-Wong, pitches a traffic study with the aim of *increasing* the drivability of Yonge Street.

But Ms. Wong-Tam's approach also manifests the mayor's desire to increase public-sector funding of city development, and proves him right when he claims there are alternative ways to cover costs traditionally

shouldered by the city.

So does she worry that her initiative is playing right into Mr. Ford's hands?

"It's an excellent question," she said. "I'm fully aware of the political posturing that would likely take place over an initiative like this because it fits into a certain ideology."

She insists the model is only applicable in certain Toronto neighbourhoods, the ones that have the financial means to chip in large sums of money. The Downtown Yonge BIA contributed \$10,000 as did several individual property owners.

"The private sector is not going to step up for everything, especially with respect to infrastructure money," she said. "These streets belong to Toronto and Torontonians, and to ask the private sector to build you a subway or bear costs for certain capital assets, I think, is naive."

Mr. Madi, whose company has recently done master plans for Bloor West Village, West Queen West, John Street, and the St. Lawrence Market area, said there are other implications of cities opting out of urban planning.

Local BIAs are not beholden to the same level of public input as city councils, he said, and could overlook the needs of those outside the business community.

"The worry that I have is where are the checks and balances, how do you monitor that these things are done well?" he said. "All these little incremental decisions in various neighbourhoods across the city, do they add up to a great city? Who's looking at the big picture?"

Mr. Greenberg, a former Toronto city planner who is now considered one of the world's foremost voices on urban design, said the city is already falling behind other municipalities when it comes to visionary design.

"It's nonsensical to the point of being damaging, what's happening. And it's unprofessional," he said.

He supports the involvement of the private sector, but worries it will lead to a two-tiered system of city design.

"It's terrifying in a way," said Mr. Greenberg. "On the other hand, what would be even worse would be if everybody just stopped trying."

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