

Thornlea Revitalization Study

Report of the Working Group

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Committee Composition

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Area Context

In November 2010, Staff met with Mayor Scarpitti and Councillor-elect Shore to discuss matters related to the future of the John Street/Green Lane Corridor in Thornhill. At this meeting, staff were asked to prepare terms of reference for a working group of area residents and members of the local business community to provide input into the ongoing review of this area.

The geographic area is bounded by two CN Rail lines to the west and south and the Aileen-Willowbrook neighbourhood to the north and east. It is an older, mixed employment area comprised of service, retail and commercial uses and a variety of auto-oriented service and repair uses. The area also includes Raywall Kitchens, a kitchen cabinet manufacturer and the former Canac Kitchens site, which is now vacant. The area has recently experienced transition, including the closure and demolition of the Canac Kitchens plant and a history of concerns about the impact of existing employment uses on adjacent residential areas.

Revitalization Objectives

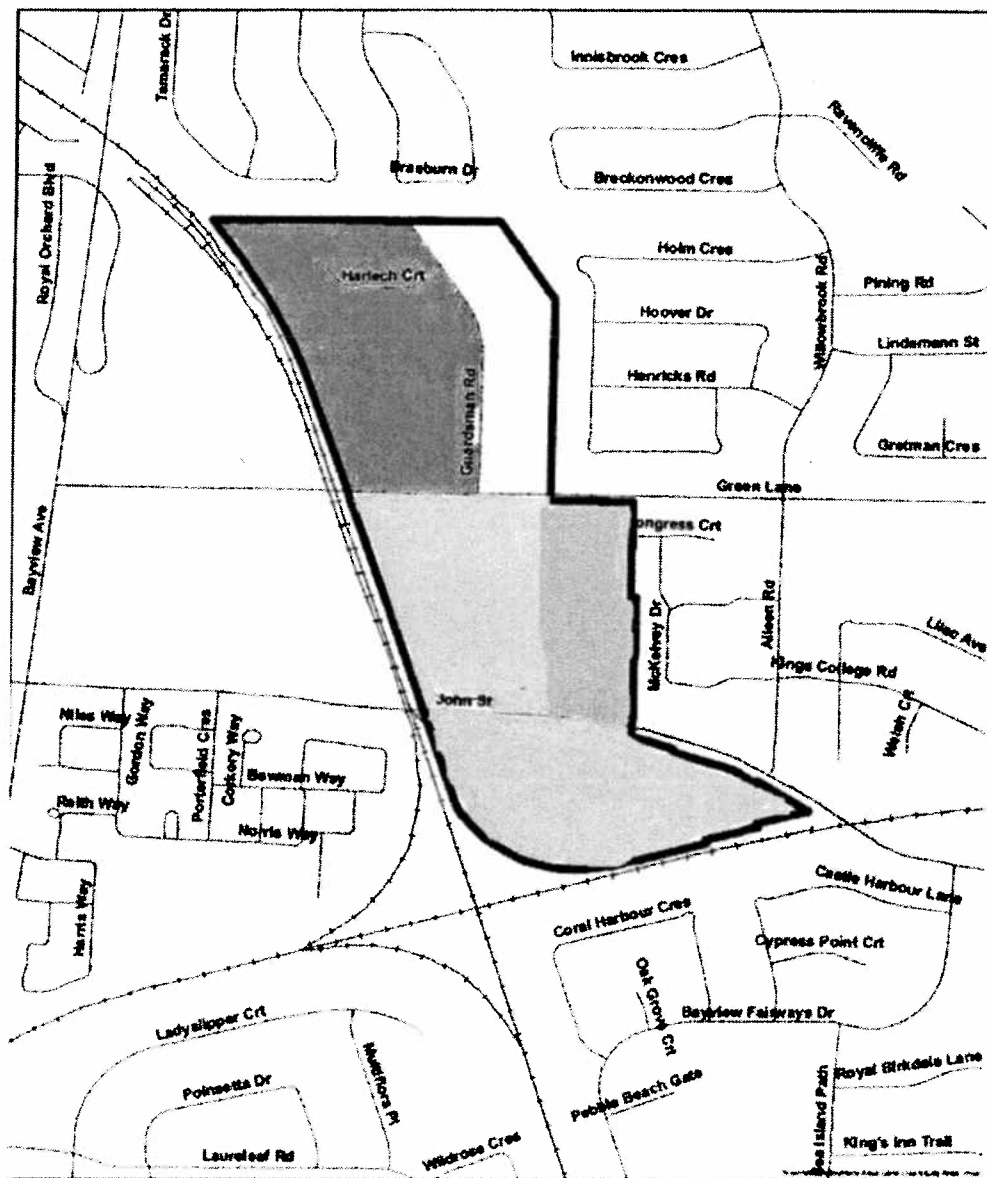
What if we could...?

- Foster a high quality living environment and to preserve the strong sense of community
 - Encourage more housing in locations with convenient access to employment opportunities and a broad range of community and commercial facilities
 - Create the Thornlea Village Business Corridor as a new zoning designation
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Key Geographic Zones

Distinct Areas

- Area 1: North of Green Lane – particularly along Guardsman Road to Harlech Court
- Area 2: South of Green Lane: not including 360 John Street
- Area 3: 360 John Street - Canac site
- Area 4: South of John Street



The Issues

Why is this study happening?

The current zoning of the Thornlea Area is neither consistent with current community needs or vision for future aspirations of the area. This needs to be addressed by Council in its review of the City's new Official Plan.

Revitalization is critical for this area to succeed economically and thrive socially.

The existing land-use designations are no longer appropriate or relevant. The emphasis has been on larger-scale employment (manufacturing) activities that had significant environmental impacts on the quality of – air, soil and noise.

Future potential development must look beyond this outdated model. This area can and should be an environmental leader and showcase for the rest of Markham by strongly encouraging new businesses to be:

- non-polluting, and therefore not requiring a Ministry of the Environment (MOE) Certificate of Approval;
- emit low noise and thereby do not disturb the surrounding residential neighbourhoods; and,
- maintain high property standards consistent with the residential character and demonstrating pride of ownership and place in the community.



Harlech Court: Manufacturing and automotive businesses in the back yard of residential homes



Automotive industries across from residential homes.

Guiding Principles

A Strategic Revitalization

This Plan was initiated to develop a strategic revitalization plan for the Thornlea Area, with particular emphasis on improving employment options/alternatives and physical appearance while maintaining a strong sense of residential community.

The objective of the Plan is to create a more vibrant commercial corridor by strengthening the area's economic base to reflect today's business conditions and Markham's economic strategy; create a sense of place that can be enjoyed by all nearby residents, and to help determine development opportunities for potentially underutilized sites.

Community Priorities

During the Working Group study process we agreed on core principles that should be prioritized in the Plan. These five renewal principles are:

1. The Thornlea Area serving as a showcase for commercial leadership environmentally in protection of residents from harmful environmental odours, emissions and noise and, encouraging businesses to locate in this Corridor which adhere to the highest technical standards for light, noise and odour and thereby not requiring a Certificate of Approval from the Ministry of the Environment;
 2. A vibrant retail/commercial/office use that encourages increased neighbourhood and visitor patronage;
 3. Active, walk-able and safe streets;
 4. Increased connectivity between residential and employment areas with pathway, etc.
 5. Greener public spaces.
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Considerations

Create a place, not a design

The goal is to create a place that has both a strong sense of community and a comfortable image, as well as a setting, activities and uses that collectively add up to something more than the sum of its often simple parts.

Have a vision

- An idea of what kinds of activities might be happening in the space, a view that the space should be comfortable and have a good image, and that it should be an important place where people want to be. It should instil a sense of pride in the people who live and work in the surrounding area.

Start with the Petunias – Public Realm Improvements

- Lighter, quicker, cheaper elements such as seating, outdoor cafes, public art, striping of crosswalks and pedestrian havens, community gardens and murals are examples of improvements that can be accomplished in a short time.

We realize...You are never finished

- Being open to the need for change and having the flexibility to enact that change is what builds great public spaces and great cities and towns.

Surrounding these employment lands in the Thornlea area are the communities of Willowbrook/Aileen, King's College, Green Lane and Huntington Park. These residential neighbourhoods are ever-mindful of the threats to people's health and well-being caused by the industrial manufacturing of the former Canac Kitchens and it is a lens through which many view the future of this area. These long-lasting memories will have a profound effect on community buy-in to future plans. The future disposition of the Canac site will be a critical concern going forward.



Current Canac Site – 360 John Street, Oct 2012

Challenges

It's not easy to change

Many of the local businesses are sole proprietorships or small independent operations that employ “seat of the pants” approach to business planning and visioning. They may have a hard time seeing the benefits of a Community Improvement Plan or why the City would force them to tidy up their properties with little visible financial benefit to them.

As noted, the local residents have long memories of the environmental battles that were waged. These memories will affect their acceptance of new plans.

Current business activity is a disjointed array of largely industrial, retail and commercial uses. A new designation could help transform this area into a mini-destination of shops, cafes, restaurants much like the redevelopment success on Shops at Don Mills.

The majority of businesses are in the auto repair and body shop industry, meaning the area experiences the following:

- Harmful environmental impact – noise, air pollution including odour and garbage;
- Terrible property visuals – facades, building signage and building frontages are visually unappealing.
- Poor property standards – Outdoor storage is abysmal, a source of vermin and it degrades the entire area.
- Disorderly appearance – A succession of very independent property owners have developed this area over the past 50 years with little regard for overall appearance. Every building is a silo independent of its neighbour.
- Only a select few of the current building owners appear committed to upgrading the appearance of their properties.
- Some of these existing conditions can be improved through vigilant application of existing codes at the local and provincial level – but this requires diligence and regular inspection, particularly by Markham Property Standards and not merely as a response to a particular complaint. We ask that Council direct staff to proactively enforce local by-laws that apply to industrial areas, including but not limited to outdoor storage, noise and property standards. The emphasis has to be on reducing noxious impact on the surrounding residential areas.



John Street, between overpass and Aileen Road

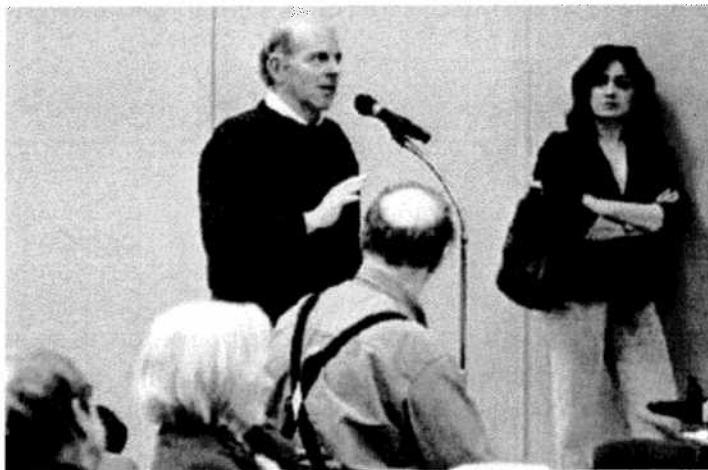
Car Dealership

Coffee Shop/Fitness Centre

Persian Restaurant

Community Engagement

Working Together



Community engagement has been integral to this Plan. The local Councillor, Howard Shore, hosted an initial Town Hall event in April, 2011 following adoption of Terms of Reference and creation of the Working Group by Council. The Working Group comprised members of both the area business community and local residents and met on multiple occasions from September 2011 through June 2012. Working Group meetings focused on themes, including:

- Current provincial and regional planning policy framework the Growth Management Strategy
- Walking tour
- Servicing and Transportation issues
- Urban Design Matters
- Options and alternatives
- General Town Hall meeting

Throughout the process, residents were engaged via multiple social media tools: Facebook, Twitter, blogging as well as traditional mailings to the entire neighbourhood and a second Town Hall meeting hosted by Councillor Shore on April 25, 2012, all to ensure the inclusion of local input.

Plan the Future

The future should be in environmentally conscious green businesses that are caring neighbours to the surrounding residential community. To accomplish this objective, the City will have to adopt a comprehensive strategy for the study area that is a significant departure from past practice. Current zoning requirements are outdated and this needs to change drastically. Redevelopment and transition in this area must consider the activities that do not impact adversely on the surrounding neighbourhoods, particularly from any health aspect.

This vibrant area can embrace the future by looking to growth sectors already identified by Markham: hi-tech services, finance and insurance, information and culture, professional, scientific and technical services.

We are encouraged that one building on Harlech Court has already been removed and the current proposal is to replace it with a well-designed, low-rise office building with landscaping which demonstrates true pride of ownership. We believe this design could demonstrate how Harlech Court can be redeveloped over time to provide space for these high-priority sectors.

"This site is located in a very small area of light industrial, surrounded by typical suburban residential homes. There are very few amenities in the immediate area to attract creative businesses or individuals at the moment, making this a challenging site to design for, however, it also holds the possibility of becoming the seed that sparks a creative community revitalization."

Institute Without Borders

The Road Forward

It starts with a vision

- The Thornlea Business-Village has the opportunity to be a vibrant and eclectic mix of residential and commercial development that is reflective of its residents' dynamic cultural heritage. This area needs to have a strong, varied economy and be a destination for innovative business development.

- Residential and commercial areas throughout this corridor will be connected through the celebration of cultural diversity, encouragement of accessibility, and enrichment of green and public spaces. Effective collaboration of government, business and community stakeholders will create desirable and unique shopping destinations that will provide residents and visitors a welcoming and memorable experience. Increasingly safe and lively public spaces along with a unique defined sense of place will encourage all to return again.
- There are competing interests for the significant tracts of vacant and underutilized lands in this area. While there are some who have suggested that the entire corridor should be converted to residential usage, this is neither reasonable nor likely.

Pedestrian Traffic

- Green Lane and John Streets are busy collector roads, yet pedestrian traffic is almost non-existent. These streets could benefit from retail and commercial activity that take advantage of on-street frontage and help to transform the area into a real community.

• **Wouldn't it be great if the area ...?**

• *... could become a mini-destination for shopping, restaurants, cafes, etc., particularly on the vacant and underutilized lands.*

Land Use and Zoning

Neighbourhood revitalization must reflect where we are headed as a City. Land use and zoning are one set of tools to implement revitalization but there is no one size fits all approach. Neighbourhood plans are designed to customize and apply these tools based on the area's unique conditions, legislative policies, and community

priorities.

Change is incremental and will not happen overnight. But, it cannot happen without the municipality, in co-operation with area residents, taking a leadership role in defining the appropriate and best uses (with environmental stewardship as a guiding principal) for the next decade and beyond.

The ultimate goal of the area to the north of Green Lane in the Guardsman/Harlech Court district should be having the study area look as close to a pre-planned Business Park as possible. Appropriate entrance-way signage would lend considerably towards this ends. This could equally be the case with regards to the district south of John Street.

Recommendations

Protecting the Environment:

- The City could actively monitor the Provincial Environmental Registry Website to ensure that Thornhill residents are aware of any applications for Certificates of Approval in the study area and produce a quarterly report to the City's General Committee.

Clean properties:

- The City shall examine all means available to enforce Property Standards By-laws to the greatest extent possible in the Study Area. This may include working in co-operation with the Provincial Ministry of the Environment, particularly regarding enforcement of cases of suspected environmental pollution, i.e. dumping.

Potential Thornlea Village Business Uses:

- A new distinct name for this area such as the Thornlea Village Business Corridor should be adopted. This designation would provide for a combination of light and moderate-intensity uses that do not create environmental nuisances or hazards to a degree which might be obnoxious or offensive to persons residing or conducting business in this or adjacent areas.
- This new designation contemplates a mix of high quality business activities in the Thornlea Revitalization study area with a residential mixed-use transition Area specific to the property located at 360 John Street
- A Business Corridor designation would encourage retail and commercial uses for properties facing Green Lane and John Street and would provide for more pedestrian-friendly destinations.
- The local community does not support medium or high density development.

The following policies could be implemented:

- Encourage the phasing out of non-conforming uses through the elimination or adaptive reuse or re-purposing of existing non-residential buildings
- Encourage the adaptive reuse of old industrial buildings for offices, retail, artisans, or other compatible uses
- We recommend that public and private sector finances contribute to a transformed Thornlea Village Business area in the following areas:
 - Area and building signage
 - Street furniture and streetscapes
 - Property amelioration

- New development projects
 - Industry
- Consistent with a request of Markham's Cycling and Pedestrian Committee, consideration should be given towards using the sidewalk on the north side of Green Lane, between Bayview and Leslie being designated as a Multi-Use Pathway (MUP).

Recommended Potential Business Uses:

- Service use: such as non-auto body repair shops, mechanical supply shops, framing shops, upholstery repair etc
- Offices: including medical, professional offices
- Galleries: including art studio, graphic design
- Banks and financial institutions
- Retail: uses that are restricted in size and do not occupy all of a multiple unit building
- Trade school or commercial school
- Sports, health and fitness recreational
- Day care centres
- Motor vehicle sales and rental
- Research and training centres
- Data processing and related facilities
- Other similar uses consistent with the planned function and policies of the category of designation, including coffee shops, restaurants, dry cleaning outlets (pick-up only)
- Pharma
- Independent Living retirement

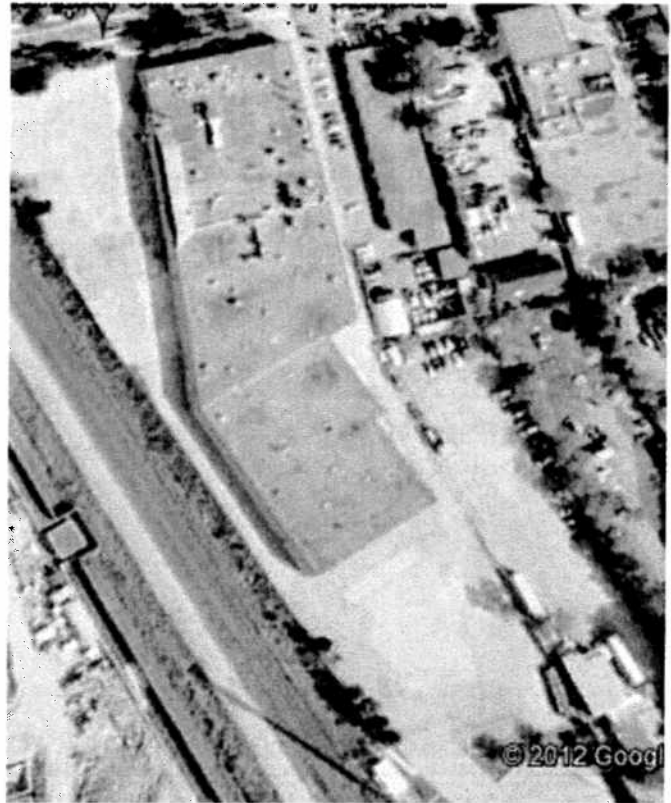
Prohibited Uses:

The following uses should be prohibited on lands within this area:

- Auto-body paint and repair;
- Automobile repair uses;
- Commercial "self-storage" warehouses;
- Retail and industrial uses involving accessory outdoor storage and/or display of merchandise
- Industrial manufacturing
- Any land use not included on the permitted land use list shall be considered as prohibited

Vacant Buildings:

- Vacant buildings in the study area could be repurposed, retrofitted and used as viable space for growth in Markham's priority economic sector.
- Repurposed buildings save material by reusing existing structures, also known as adaptive reuse--or recycling otherwise landfill-bound objects as building materials. For those who work in them, there is the prospect of working in a space that is unlike any other.
- Part of this proposal could also include a business incubator in the mid- to long-term (two to ten years), in repurposed manufacturing and/or warehouse structures such as that located at 67 Green Lane for small and local entrepreneurs



Existing Businesses

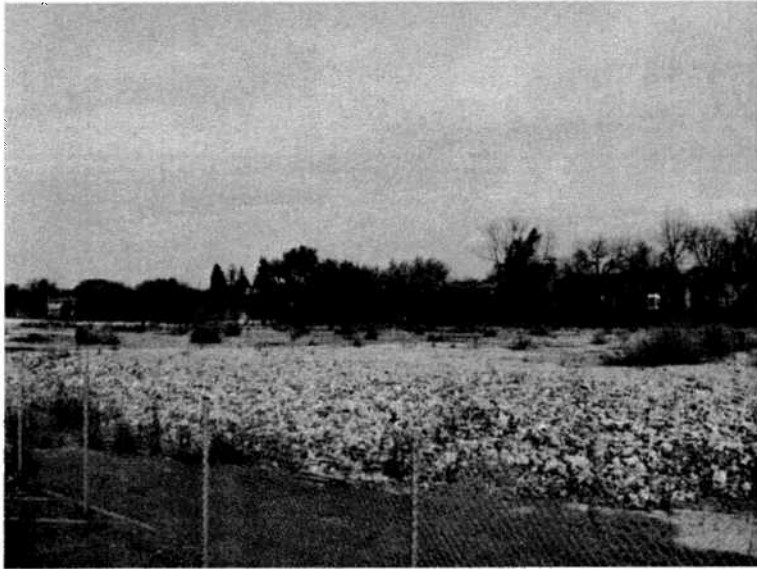
- Under the Planning Act, if a selected option no longer permits a current existing use, the existing use will be considered "legal non-conforming use". As long as the property having a non-conforming use status does not change, its status is protected.
- Any expansion to a legal conforming use shall require the approval of the City of Markham and specifically, the Committee of Adjustment.

Criteria for New Business

- Neighbourhood businesses should maintain high visual quality and are consistent in size, height, bulk, and design with adjacent uses;
- Using landscaping to enhance compatibility, provide screening, and promote transitions between the commercial uses and adjacent and nearby residential uses;
- Regulating signs and lighting to enhance compatibility, avoid visual clutter, and prevent light trespass onto adjacent uses;
- Including features that encourage greater use by pedestrians and bicyclists, such as convenient sidewalks and bicycle parking facilities;
- Identify Green Lane as a Multi-Use Pathway sidewalk expansion pilot project
- Adhering to the highest legislative standard and encouraging the highest technical standards for light, noise and odour;

- Encouraging and fostering an environment for businesses which do not require a Certificate of Approval

Residential Mixed-Use Area Specific to Area 3: Canac Site



- Accommodate low density (no more than 2 storeys in height), upscale residential use with low intensity commercial/retail uses along both the John Street and Green Lane frontages. These should be strategically situated on this property which would provide for an appropriate transition buffer to neighbouring employment and be considerate of design, height, and materials and sensitive to adjacent residential neighbourhoods. Such a development should include complimentary retail and service uses

which would offer employment opportunities consistent with the City's objective of retaining viable employment, while serving the needs of this new community.

- Expressly prohibit new industrial expansion in this area
- The existing residential communities would strongly prefer to see residential development as being the best use of the lands on the area identified as 'Area 3' i.e. the former Canac Kitchen site as a transition between the existing residential neighbourhoods of McKelvey Drive, Woodhouse Drive and Congress Court and the current employment use to the west of this Area.
- In order to protect the residential characteristics of the area, commercial development will be limited to the following:
 - Low intensity and pedestrian oriented commercial uses, such as professional offices and small retail or commercial businesses.
 - Any new residential development in this Area must be pedestrian friendly and provide for a small-scale central area where residents could find benches, shading, and perhaps a visual attraction all could be proud of.
- Automobile-oriented land uses, such as gas stations, non-accessory parking lots, and other drive-through uses will not be accommodated

Community Improvement

What is a Community Improvement Plan?

Subsection 28(7) of the Planning Act authorizes a municipality to make grants or loans to registered or assessed owners, and to tenants, of lands and buildings within Community Improvement Project Areas towards the cost of rehabilitating properties in conformity with a Community Improvement Plan, subject to the approval of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. A Community Improvement Plan (CIP) is an important tool as it allows the Town to direct funds and implement policy initiatives that would normally be unavailable for a specifically defined area. For designated Community Improvement Project Areas, such as the Thornlea Business-Village Project Area, a CIP can include a number of components, including:

- grants for realty tax rebates
- façade improvement grants capital improvements

CIP Objectives:

- Improve environmental health and safety;
- Stimulate reinvestment and redevelopment of the Thornlea Village Business Project Area.
- Stabilize this valuable employment centre and remove land use uncertainty;
- Encourage rehabilitation of the existing employment uses;
- Attract new employment investment to any lands and/or buildings that are vacant, underutilized, idled, or in need of repair or renovation, resulting in increased assessment and tax revenue;
- Retain and increase employment opportunities;
- Improve the physical and visual quality of this employment area;
- Stimulate private investment activity and private property maintenance.

Community Improvement Plan and other Funding Sources:

- This area should be given priority consideration for Community Improvement Plan (CIP) adoption to promote revitalization. Assuming the local and provincial staff can address existing environmental concerns, the next priority is upgrading the overall appearance of the area. A CIP designation would address the unsightly visuals by creating consistent signage, lighting and streetscapes as well as upgrading individual building frontages that could make the area more appealing.
- There are various tools that the municipality and local industry can use to create a clean, cohesive look to this business area. Various policy and financial tools available to the City include tax incremental financing (TIF), facade improvement grants, and development

charge reduction fees. The Working Group would recommend a Committee comprised of City staff as well as area residents serve as a panel in awarding any CIP funding.

Community Improvement Project Area:

- Emphasize pedestrian-friendly design and walk-able neighbourhoods.
- Provide employment opportunities near major housing areas.
- Provide a variety of neighbourhood commercial opportunities.
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place.
- Identify sites suitable for mixed-use business-village development that will complement the existing community fabric or help achieve desired community character
- some neighbourhoods may have an industrial orientation, while others may be major shopping destinations, entirely residential in nature, or, as in the case of the Thornlea Area, a well-established, mature residential community with a significant commercial employment pocket within;
- Provide standards that address the particular design issues related to mixed-use projects, such as parking, noise and odour attenuation measures.

A Final Thought

Concluding Summary

- Neighbourhood businesses should maintain high visual quality and be consistent in size, height, bulk, and design with adjacent uses;
- Designate this Study area as the Thornlea Village Business Corridor
- Rezone 360 John Street to 'Residential Mixed-Use'
- Council designate the Thornlea Village Business Study Area as a Community Improvement Project Area & adopt a Community Improvement Plan
- Rezone Areas 1, 3 & 4 to allow for new uses and eliminate out-dated uses to encourage a transformation to cleaner, less noisy and unsightly uses

These land use changes have the potential to make the city more vibrant, economically healthy, exciting, and even more environmentally sustainable than it is today. We can affect positive outcomes in all parts of Thornlea by setting policies on appropriate uses and densities, and describing how different uses can successfully coexist. This is a unique opportunity to contribute lasting community change.