

NEWS BRIEF



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THE FUTURE OF THE CNR BELT LINE - PUBLIC PARK OR PRIVATE PROPERTY?

The Canadian National Railways is eager to dispose of its little-used Belt Line through Toronto. The future of this Belt Line right-of-way has become the subject of considerable public controversy in recent weeks. After careful consideration of the positions articulated by various individuals, groups, and City and Metro departments, the Bureau of Municipal Research strongly endorses Future Use Alternative 1 recommended by the City of Toronto Planning Board: "To retain the right-of-way as a single parcel for a pedestrian and possibly a bicycle trail linking existing parks and open space with the ravines of Toronto!"

The park system thus created - stretching from the southern tip of David Balfour Park, through Mount Pleasant Cemetery, along the Belt Line beyond the City Limits into York and, linked by various streets, all the way to the Humber - would be an incalculable asset to all of Metropolitan Toronto, particularly the City. For, as many officials have pointed out, Toronto is gravely short of park space. Unless swift, decisive action is taken by City Council to begin negotiations to purchase the land from the CNR before the right of way is sold to other interested parties, an unparalleled opportunity to carry out Council's previously stated policy to develop a continuous parks system (Official Plan for the City of Toronto Planning Area, Part 1, Section 5.3, p.20) will be lost.

The Belt Line has an average width of about 60 feet and stretches for 2.8 miles within the City Limits. It runs from Mount Pleasant Road at the northern side of the Mount Pleasant Cemetery, along Merton Street, then in a north-westerly direction through Forest Hills to the City Limits immediately south of Elm Ridge Avenue. It is composed of approximately 21 acres and affects three planning districts: Eglinton, Deer Park and Forest Hill. It passes through several areas of high rise apartments: Yonge-Lascelles, Eglinton-Bathurst and Elm-Marlee. The bulk of the remaining area is low-density residential.

Extensive sections of the right-of-way are either depressed, or screened by trees, shrubs and fences from the surrounding area. Even in its present derelict condition, with glass-strewn gravel lying between

rusty rails, the Belt Line has an impressive variety of shrubs and trees along its length - poplars, maples, willows, ashes, etc. Several types of wild flowers are to be seen gallantly growing in the most unpromising of circumstances, and city noises are effectively masked by the rustle of poplar leaves. The area is already popular among amateur bird-watchers. Although there are stretches of the Belt Line that are unscreened from their city surroundings, its potential as a peaceful, beautifully landscaped walk-way is obvious. And within the 2.8 miles of the Belt Line there are two schools and no fewer than six parks or parkettes, all of which could be easily woven together by this right-of-way.

The three alternative uses for the Belt Line, presented for discussion by the City of Toronto Planning Board are:

(1) to retain the right-of-way as a single parcel for a pedestrian and possibly a bicycle trail linking existing parks and open space with the ravines of Toronto;

(2) to allow the right-of-way to be severed into separate parcels for the sole purpose of extending abutting properties, once the City has acquired those sections necessary for municipal purposes or desirable for the community at large;

(3) the City to acquire the whole right-of-way and lease to abutting property owners those sections not immediately required for public purposes. Since Alternative 3 is presented as a compromise and since most of the debate has focussed on Alternatives 1 and 2, we shall restrict our comments to these.

OPPOSITION TO THE BELT LINE PARK: WIDESPREAD AND JUSTIFIED?

How widespread is the opposition to making the Belt Line into a public park? Is this opposition truly representative of the "Belt Line Community" or is it generated by only a segment of that community? And how justified are the arguments of the opposition group? Although considerable publicity has been given to the groups opposing the Belt Line Park idea, the Bureau has found evidence to indicate that the opposition to the strip park idea is far from unanimous. An analysis of the letters and briefs written for the July 22 meeting of the City Executive which discussed the future of the Belt Line, the correspondence to the Planning Board concerning the future of the Forest Hill planning district, extracts from public planning discussions in Forest Hill, and the results of an informal Bureau survey of opinion in the Belt Line area indicates that:

(1) opposition to the park stems almost exclusively from property owners whose land abuts the Belt Line;

(2) support for the park, while also stemming from property owners whose land abuts the Belt Line, is reflected in the wide base of the community as a whole.

The distribution of opposition and support for the park points to a fundamental problem of urban politics: the reconciliation of preferences of the minority in conflict with those of the wider community. To effect

a reconciliation, a careful examination of the neighbourhood objections must be undertaken. Should council decide in favour of a Belt Line Park, exaggerated and unjustified fears and suspicions must be allayed, while reasonable objections must be met by making provisions to protect the privacy and safety of the residents. The following are the major reasons most often given in opposition to a Belt Line Park:

- (1) fear of invasion of privacy;
- (2) fear of increased burglary, vandalism and immorality;
- (3) fear of increased noise and litter;
- (4) fear of lowered property values;
- (5) concern about the high cost of park acquisition, development and maintenance; and
- (6) questioning of the usefulness of park land the size of the Belt Line area.

Invasion of Privacy

Invasion of privacy is a legitimate fear, but privacy can be preserved by the provision of visual barriers: trees, shrubs, ivy-covered fences, high wooden fences, and so on. Many sections of the Belt Line are already visually protected, and these could easily be extended.

Increased Vandalism

The fear of increased vandalism, burglary and immorality is also very real, but, we feel, exaggerated and not well substantiated by facts. There have been incidents of vandalism, burglary and immoral behavior on the Belt Line, but we feel that these would be reduced, not increased, by the creation of a public park. A derelict, unpatrolled area (such as the present Belt Line) certainly provides much more fertile ground for crimes of all sorts than a well-lit, well-maintained, well-patrolled public park (Commissioner Forrest has given assurances that this area, like other public parks, would be well patrolled by mounted policemen.) The fear of crime, it should be noted, is not unanimous among Belt Line users - many people who frequently walk along the right-of-way have indicated that they have no such fears.

Increased Noise

A number of residents have mentioned increased noise (particularly from motorbikes and snowmobiles) and litter as reasons for opposing a park. Both of these could be guarded against by proper design, regulations for vehicular use, patrolling and maintenance.

Lower Property Values

Some opponents of the park concept have mentioned that lower property values would result from proximity to a public park. A number of studies across North America have indicated, however, that just the opposite is more likely to occur: property values generally increase when a nearby park is created.

Cost of Park Acquisition

Concern about the high cost of park acquisition, development, and maintenance is another cause of opposition to the park project. We feel, however, that the purchase of the Belt Line -- a continuous strip 2.8 miles long in the heart of the City -- would be a bargain. Costs are relative -- relative both to the immeasurable social benefits of such a park and to the predictable cost of other possible park acquisitions. Seldom--if ever again -- will such an economical opportunity arise. Generally, the City will have to content itself with acquiring small, isolated parcels of land. But here is a chance to acquire -- with one single purchase -- a long strip which will link together and make more accessible other parcels of parkland. Furthermore, here is a chance to create parkland without the additional cost and hardship of demolishing houses. And the cost of development should be relatively inexpensive since the Belt Line would be a walking park, rather than a recreation area. The Planning Board is in the process of preparing development plans, thus the public should soon have an idea of the estimated costs. Finally, as in all walking parks, maintenance costs would also be small both in absolute terms and certainly relative to the benefits enjoyed by the park's users.

Limited Park Size

Some people have argued that the area is too small and narrow to be of much use as a park. We feel very strongly, however, that just the opposite is true. In the creation of successful parks, it is the impression of open space, rather than the actual acreage, that is important. As open space expert, William H. Whyte has pointed out in The Last Landscape (pp.172, 177)

"Per acre linear strips are probably the most efficient form of open space. When they are laid along the routes people travel or walk, or probe into the places where they live, the spaces provide the maximum visual impact and the maximum physical access...The connective strips" (and Whyte specifically mentions abandoned railroad rights-of-way) "are worthwhile in their own right, but they become even more functional when they are tied in with other strips of open space -- with community parks, school sites...The total acreage is not a significant figure. What can make the acreage so effective is the fact of linkage and a relatively few small spaces can often make the difference."

In short, the purchase of 21 acres of parkland in the heart of a built-up city, linking other parks and ravines together, seems a much wiser expenditure of park funds than the purchase of a larger parcel on the edge of the built-up area, accessible to fewer people and giving the impression of less open space.

Support for the idea of a linear park is widespread. In addition to the people living in the immediate area mentioned above, individuals and groups from all over Toronto have shown support for the Belt Line Park. Some of the groups include: Pollution Probe, the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club (1000 members), the York-Forest Hill Provincial Liberal Association, and the Toronto Hiking and Conservation Club (100 members). The number of people belonging to those organizations alone is much greater than the total number of people who have signed petitions against the park idea (98 owners of property abutting on the right-of-way). We feel that there is no doubt that a pedestrian walk-way would be enjoyed by a great number of people from all over Metro.

A POSSIBILITY OF DEVELOPMENT

At the outset, we mentioned that there are three alternative future uses for the Belt Line which have been presented for public debate by the City Planning Board. There is in fact a fourth alternative which has recently come to the Bureau's attention and which deserves immediate public discussion: Private ownership and development of the Belt Line as a whole by a group other than property owners whose land abuts the right-of-way. Appendix B of Item 4 (a), July 7, 1970 meeting of the City Planning Board, lists the individuals and companies interested in purchasing the Belt Line (information from the C.N.R. Real Estate Department June, 1970). All except one are individuals and companies wishing to purchase the land adjacent to their own property, presumably to extend the present use of the property. The exception is an architect in the field of residential design, Mr. Sheldon D. Rosen, who "represents a client who is interested in purchasing the whole right-of-way". It would be reasonable to conclude that the group in question intends to use the Belt Line for some form of residential development. Yet, whatever the specific development intention is, it should and must be made public and become part of the debate over the future use of the Belt Line. The Bureau maintains, however, that any proposal for residential development of the Belt Line would be completely untenable in that:

- (1) the City of Toronto is in real need of open space parkland;
- (2) the additional number of people brought into the area which already has 28,000 living within $\frac{1}{4}$ miles of the Belt Line, as the result of such development would only serve to further increase pressures on the existing parks and parkettes.
- (3) approval of a residential development for this open space would be in direct conflict with Council's stated policy of expanding park lands and developing a continuous park system.

In conclusion, the Bureau urges the City Executive Committee and City Council, at its forthcoming meeting on August 26, to support Alderman Reid Scott's motion that "it is the opinion of this Council that the C.N.R. Belt Line should be acquired and held for public purposes". In addition, we look forward to the fulfilling of campaign positions taken by virtually all the members of Council and illustrated here by the CIVAC policy paper on Planning and Development: "Toronto does not have enough parks. We will conserve all existing parkland, and introduce a program to acquire more". Swift action is essential. The City must make its intentions known immediately, before the property is sold in one piece to a developer or in numerous small parcels to other private citizens. It would be tragic if through lack of foresight, the City were to squander this, perhaps final, opportunity to purchase a sizeable piece of parkland in the heart of the City. It is indeed "an unequalled opportunity" as City Parks Commissioner Ivan Forrest has said. Now is the time for the aldermen of this City to demonstrate their concern for all of the people of Toronto and avoid sacrificing the public interest to private interests, either by design or by lack of decision.