

# TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY

## EQUINOX, Toronto (Scarborough)



**EQUINOX**

*Figure 1—Equinox's two 37-storey towers, with transit station in the background*

Source: Goldman Group

### Project data

<b>Project name</b>	Equinox
<b>Developer</b>	Land development: Goldman Group; Builder: Monarch Construction
<b>Date completed</b>	2005
<b>Site area</b>	1.27 ha (3.14 acres)
<b>Number, type, size of residential units</b>	689 condominium apartment units in two 37 storey high-rise towers in two phases. Phase one (first tower): 340 units; Phase two (second tower): 349 units. Condominium unit sizes range from 51 to 90 m <sup>2</sup> (547 to 967 sq. ft.).
<b>Other land uses on the site</b>	Nine retail suites totalling 800 m <sup>2</sup> (8,611 sq. ft.)
<b>Gross residential density</b>	543 uph (units per hectare); 220 upa (units per acre)
<b>Maximum height</b>	37 storeys
<b>Parking</b>	771 underground parking stalls total, six surface stalls (visitor/loading)
<b>Unit selling prices</b>	Prices in 2005 ranged from \$130,000 to \$230,000.
<b>Type of transit</b>	Rapid Transit (light rail)
<b>Distance to transit station</b>	Less than 25 m (80 ft.); site is immediately adjacent to station.
<b>Pedestrian connectivity</b>	Excellent, adjacent to public stairway connection and new bridge connects the site to station.

**PROJECT SUMMARY**

Equinox

The Equinox development is a 1.27 hectare (3.14 acre) site, originally vacant and without road access (and no legal right of ways) in the heart of Scarborough Centre. Scarborough Centre, primarily a business and civic district today, is an emerging growth node for compact and mixed-use development through a focus on infill residential development.

Immediate neighbours of the development include: an office building; the Scarborough Centre Rapid Transit Station; the Scarborough Town Centre Shopping Mall with 120,000 m<sup>2</sup> (1,291,670 sq. ft.) of retail space; the Scarborough Civic Centre; and a major civic square (Albert Campbell Square).

The broader Scarborough Centre area is also home to a variety of other retail, commercial and residential uses, parks, natural areas (including woodlots) and vacant lands. The Equinox project contains 689 units in two, 37-storey, high-rise towers with retail uses at-grade in one building.

The buildings are located immediately adjacent to a rapid transit station and were directly connected to the station by a pedestrian bridge in 2007. Transit users and residents benefit from an emerging pedestrian network and road system throughout the site.

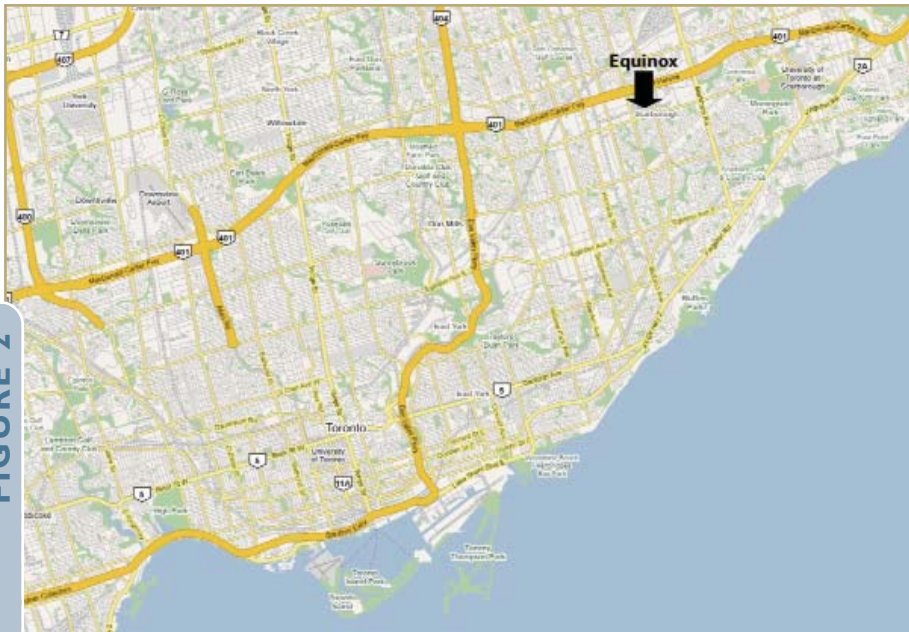
**TRANSIT SYSTEM OVERVIEW AND PROJECT CONTEXT**

The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC), operates the subway and bus system in the City of Toronto. The major east-west line moving across the region (Bloor–Danforth Line) was extended to Kennedy Station, the current eastern terminus on the western edge of the former Borough of Scarborough, in 1968. A rapid transit connection from Kennedy Station to Scarborough Centre, a 69 ha (170 acre) area designated for town centre uses, was completed when the Scarborough Rapid Transit (SRT) line was opened in 1985.

The terminus of the SRT also acts as storage and maintenance yards. The corridor was located on a surplus right-of-way in an existing CNR rail and Ontario Hydro corridor and on readily available, low-cost industrial land.

The SRT line was intended to support regional employment and residential growth as an alternative to the Scarborough Expressway as part of Metropolitan Toronto’s plan before amalgamation<sup>1</sup> to develop nodes connected by transit corridors.

Today, the SRT carries over 42,000 passengers daily.<sup>2</sup> During peak periods, the SRT operates every 3½ minutes and carries about 4,000 people per hour in the peak direction. Trains are overcrowded because the existing fleet of 28 vehicles is insufficient to offer more frequent service.<sup>3</sup>



**FIGURE 2**

Regional context map showing the location of the Equinox project

Source: Adapted from ©2008 Google—Map data ©2008 Tele Atlas

<sup>1</sup> In 1998, the six municipalities that made up Metro Toronto —East York, Etobicoke, North York, Scarborough, Toronto and York—were amalgamated and became the City of Toronto.

<sup>2</sup> City of Toronto/Toronto Transit Commission, August 2006. *Scarborough RT Strategic Plan—Study Report, Final Report.*

<sup>3</sup> City of Toronto/Toronto Transit Commission, August 2006. *Scarborough RT Strategic Plan—Study Report, Final Report.*

FIGURE 3



Rapid transit line

Source: Goldman Group

The SRT has been highly successful and currently is supplemented by an express bus line. Even during the recession in the late 1990s, the line did not lose ridership. Without an increase in capacity the SRT cannot properly service increased density along its route.

Recognizing that Toronto’s Official Plan calls for considerable intensification of population and employment in northeast Scarborough, notably in the general area of the Scarborough City Centre, the TTC, in conjunction with the City of Toronto, recently completed the Scarborough Rapid Transit Strategic Plan, which reviewed options for addressing current congestion and adding capacity to the busy line. Equinox is located immediately adjacent to the SRT line at the Scarborough Centre station.

### DEVELOPER’S PERSPECTIVE

The site was developed through a joint venture by the Goldman Group, which was responsible for land development, and the Monarch Group, which was responsible for building construction. The site, originally owned by the Eaton family, was landlocked—it was surrounded by publicly-owned lands between the property and the nearest road access, and considered of little value. As a result, the developer had to acquire these other publicly owned lands through a subdivision process to gain road access to the site. After acquiring them, the site’s development potential and value increased significantly.

Most passengers transfer to and from the Bloor–Danforth subway to connect to the TTC’s vast transit system. Although there are four intermediate stops along the SRT, the main focus of the service has always been to support land development and intensification in the general vicinity of Scarborough Centre and to act as a continuation of the Bloor–Danforth subway.

FIGURE 4



Location of the Equinox development in proximity to the SRT Line.

Photo Source: ©2008 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

The Goldman Group was motivated by a vision to develop high-density residential development near the transit station. The Scarborough City Centre Plan (prior to amalgamation with the City of Toronto) called for high-density and high-rise institutional and office uses but did not originally call for intense residential uses. Recent policy directions and urban development trends have led to including high-density residential uses in mixed-use areas as a means to create vibrant centres that minimize use of the private automobile.

The Scarborough Centre's existing transit service, employment and shopping precincts were seen as optimal conditions for new residential development. The Goldman Group's acquisition of the site capitalized on these new policy directions in Toronto and now stands as an exemplary transit-oriented development project in the region.

### Parking and bicycle storage

The Equinox has 771 underground parking stalls for homeowners and six surface parking stalls for visitors. This equates to an average of 1.1 parking stalls per unit for the project, as required by the City. There was no indoor bicycle parking included in the project. The City of Toronto has since passed a bylaw requiring bicycle parking stalls for projects of this nature.

Since this project has been developed and occupied, the developer has begun the pre-sale and development of two other high-rise towers within 50–100 m (160–320 ft.) of the site on previously acquired properties. Due to the success of the Equinox towers in sales and design, the new towers will proceed with reduced parking standards. The developer would also like to allow purchasers to opt-out of parking stalls if the City and developer can reach an agreement.

### Transit-Oriented Design Considerations

The residential towers are immediately adjacent to the SRT station. Through a Section 37 agreement under the *Ontario Planning Act*,<sup>4</sup> the developer was required to develop a bridge



FIGURE 5

*Residential towers are immediately adjacent to the SRT station.*

that would make the transit station easily accessible from the site. The bridge was completed in 2007. The bridge connection to the transit station was paid for and built by the developer in exchange for a density increase, all negotiated during the approvals process.

### Project Success and Costs

Units sold very quickly and met the developer's profit expectations. However, the developer did incur additional costs due to delays in the subdivision of adjacent lands required to gain access to the development site. The developer was not in a position to share development and construction costs.

Prices for the units ranged from \$130,000 to \$230,000 in 2005. This compares to the average price for a new condominium apartment in the Toronto CMA of \$231,255 the same year.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Section 37 Agreement: The council of a local municipality may authorize increases in the height and density of development otherwise permitted by the by-law that will be permitted in return for the provision of such facilities, services or matters as are set out in the bylaw.

Retrieved from [http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/90p13\\_e.htm#BK55](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/90p13_e.htm#BK55) Jan. 4, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> CMHC, Ontario Market Analysis Centre, Toronto

## Municipal Support

This project followed a conventional planning process that included public hearings and open houses. The City held and facilitated an open house with the developer to gather public input.

## Public Consultation

Public consultation occurred prior to City staff recommendations to Council regarding land uses and site density. The City Centre Advisory Committee held a meeting early in the process of reviewing the application, attended by the developer and planning staff. General comments focused on the increased burden on the already busy Scarborough Centre Rapid Transit Station, the lack of parkland facilities in the vicinity to serve young children and the need for direct pedestrian access to the transit station. Comments received from the public helped staff seek revisions to the proposal and to formulate recommendations, including zoning performance standards, site plan requirements and further amenities to be secured from the developer under the Section 37 Agreement.

Since completion, most people recognize that the buildings, new residents and commercial uses in this area contribute to the animation of Albert Campbell Square by providing “eyes on the park.” The developer has since purchased and is in the process of developing a new site adjacent to the square that includes three residential buildings and a new park that will extend the square. The new buildings were supported by the public.

## Barriers and Obstacles

Obstacles were related to site subdivision, completing an access bridge to the transit station and tower height. Assembling the site for development required a subdivision of publicly owned lands adjacent to the site. The process for this subdivision was very time consuming for the developer



FIGURE 6

*A new site adjacent to the square that includes three residential buildings and a new park that will extend the square.*

and ultimately concluded with a decision by the Ontario Municipal Board. The developer incurred an estimated additional \$250,000 in lost time and expenses to assemble the new parcel of land to allow access to the landlocked site.

To gain access to the transit station through the pedestrian bridge the developer was required to pay an almost prohibitive connection fee of \$270,000. However, the developer was required to fulfil this obligation since it was part of the development approval process with the City of Toronto. Constructing the bridge commenced nearly two years after occupation of both towers. The delay was attributed to the approvals process with the Toronto Transit Commission.

Lastly, while not a contentious issue, the proposed tower height of 37 storeys and associated proposed density did require an Official Plan amendment. From an urban design perspective, the higher towers and increased density were intended to signal a strong neighbourhood landmark.

## Key Success Factors and Lessons Learned

The developer attributes project success to creating a strong neighbourhood node, neighbourhood and Council acceptance of the height of the towers and connecting the development to the transit station. Since completion of this project, three new towers within 100 m of the site have been proposed and the development approvals for the projects have commenced. Together these new residential buildings will add a missing vibrancy in this area and increase the overall sense of a special place and more importantly, a neighbourhood.

## MUNICIPAL PLANNER'S PERSPECTIVE

### Planning Objectives

The City of Toronto's Official Plan identifies three centres where the City can help initiate reinvestment and accommodate some growth. Centres are strategically located across the region and typically along major roads and on underused pieces of land. Growth in these centres is envisioned to support public transit and utilize and build on existing infrastructure.

The Equinox development is located within one of the identified centres—Scarborough Centre (formerly referred to as the Scarborough City Centre). The lands have been designated as a mixed use “Centre” (under the former Scarborough Official Plan). The Centre area was defined in October, 1968 when the former Borough of Scarborough designated approximately 420 ha (170 acres) of land for “Town Centre Uses.”

At the time, the intent was primarily to create a Civic Centre defined by high density institutional, cultural and employment opportunities for Scarborough. Central to the former borough and conveniently located near major roads, the Centre expanded over time to include additional lands for employment and residential uses. Today, the Centre is at the core of an established employment corridor along Highway 401. As a mixed-use area, the Scarborough Centre provides housing, employment, entertainment, recreational, cultural, governmental and social opportunities for workers, residents and visitors.

Ongoing investment in transit, roads, and other urban infrastructure has made the Centre an attractive location for compact mixed-use development. People can live close to their work and other urban amenities or travel easily to the larger City area. The Scarborough Centre has the potential to welcome upwards of 40,000 residents and attract more than 23,000 jobs over the next 30 years.

While increasing employment land use continues to be an important objective for the Scarborough Centre, current market trends do not indicate a demand for new, higher density office development. Therefore, the most recent policies of the Scarborough Centre Secondary Plan (December, 2005) look beyond limiting residential use, focusing instead on creating flexible land use policies designed to permit both employment and residential use to achieve a mixed-use centre. Housing generally takes the form of high-rise buildings, with at-grade retail uses, and townhouses as free-standing developments on-site or within the podiums of apartment buildings.

### Municipal Process and Support for Project

While the existing mixed-use zoning would have permitted the proposed residential-commercial use, an amendment to the Secondary Plan (Official Plan) was required. The Plan policies in effect at the time limited the residential density on the site to 150 units per hectare (370 units per acre).

The proposed plan resulted in a residential density in excess of that permitted by both the Official Plan and zoning bylaw. City staff supported the application, since it was consistent with emerging directions of the Toronto City-wide Official Plan review and the Scarborough Centre Secondary Plan, both of which were underway at the time. It was considered appropriate to strive for a mixed-use project on the site, with a greater emphasis on residential use.

The application for greater density triggered the opportunity to pursue an *Ontario Planning Act* Section 37 contribution in exchange for the increased density. The use of Section 37 is important as a proactive and flexible legislative tool for helping to achieve services and facilities which enhance the liveability of communities.

Typically, Section 37 has been used to secure a wide range of public benefits, including community facilities, streetscape improvements, public art and day-care facilities. City staff supported an amendment to the Official Plan, which was necessary to provide the policy context for use of the Section 37 provisions specific for this site. Ultimate approval of the Equinox development resulted in a number of community benefits secured under Section 37 including:

- the design and construction of an enclosed public pedestrian walkway and bridge and a new pedestrian entrance to the SRT station from the site; and
- a cash contribution of \$70,000 for a children’s playground in a public park within the Centre.

Lastly, the site at the time was zoned as agriculture. The City supported an amendment to its zoning bylaw to re-zone the lands for the proposed use and to establish performance standards to guide development of the site.

## Challenges

From a municipal perspective, the development was a welcome addition to Scarborough Centre. The community was generally supportive of the proposal. There were few concerns raised at the community meetings and no comments in opposition to the proposal were received by planning staff.

Constructive comments on improvements to parks and pedestrian links were provided and the developer responded by including those in the proposal. The proposal was approved by Scarborough Community Council and Toronto City Council. No appeal of the project was filed with the Ontario Municipal Board.

## Success Factors

The proposal was consistent and responsive to existing and approved development within the Centre. The use, built form, height and massing were also considered to be appropriate for the site’s location in the Centre. Building siting preserved the important view of the Civic Centre building from the SRT station. The residential buildings now provide an attractive addition to the Scarborough Centre skyline, complementing the Scarborough Civic Centre building with contextual architectural components in the design.

The design objectives of the Official Plan are to promote “uses and facilities which contribute activity to Albert Campbell Square, and adjacent pedestrian areas, in all seasons of the year and at all hours of the day.”

In order to be consistent with these objectives the developer incorporated non-residential uses into the base of one of the towers. These uses include retail stores, restaurants, and personal service shops to serve the residents of the project and to promote human activity and vitality into Albert Campbell Square.

## RESIDENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

Eighteen residents from the Equinox project were interviewed in 2007. While the sample size is considered statistically insignificant, the results provide some indication of residents’ transportation preferences and reasons for choosing to live in Equinox.

### Reason for Choosing that Location

Proximity to transit was the main reason eight respondents had for purchasing in this location. Access to amenities and proximity to work were the main factor for six other residents.

Overall, respondents were very satisfied with the quality of the project. Most reported being satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the amount of parking provided for their personal use and most were also satisfied with the parking provided for visitor use. Fifteen reported being very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the character of the neighbourhood, that is, the style and type of housing, landscaping, shops and so on that contribute to the atmosphere of the area.

All respondents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the amenities in the neighbourhood, such as shopping, services, schools and recreation. Thirteen were very or somewhat satisfied with the overall cost of living in this location even though for seven, the unit price was higher than that of their previous dwelling. A higher price was generally accepted by these respondents mostly because of proximity to transit. The design and appearance of the buildings and size of the units was very popular with most residents.

FIGURE 7



*The Equinox is immediately adjacent to the rapid transit station*

## SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Equinox is a successful mixed-use development providing housing and employment uses in the Scarborough Centre that are compatible with existing and proposed development in the area. The at-grade retail and well-defined pedestrian routes serve residents and visitors to the Centre. This provides a clearly defined edge to a major civic square, animating and creating an accessible, safe, comfortable and pedestrian-friendly environment. The connectivity of the Centre was also improved through a new road with sidewalks, pedestrian walkways through the site and a direct pedestrian bridge connection to the SRT station.

In exchange for an amendment to the Official Plan and zoning bylaw for increased density, the developer provided public amenities, such as a pedestrian bridge to the transit station. While the developer incurred additional costs and delays in providing these, the project met their profit expectations. By providing these types of public amenities and building designs and uses that are appropriate for the location, the project is also seen as successful from the point of view of the neighbours, the residents and the municipality.

## Travel to Work, Shopping and School

Of the sixteen respondents working full-time, eight said they took transit to work, one walked, six drove alone and one carpooled. Nine respondents walked to shopping, two took transit and the remaining drove alone or with others. For most respondents, their travel choices had not changed significantly since moving to this location.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

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