



# ANC Plaza Project in Scarborough Village, Toronto

Findings from the Study of Businesses in Shopping  
Plazas in Scarborough Village

March 27, 2006





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An Action for Neighbourhood Change Report  
Prepared for  
United Way of Greater Toronto  
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To United Way of Greater Toronto:

We are pleased to submit this study on businesses in Scarborough Village to United Way of Greater Toronto. This research document outlines work with local businesses undertaken by Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) in Scarborough Village. The study looked at small businesses in shopping plazas.

The business outreach project was designed to explore the role of plazas within the neighbourhood, to understand the challenges and opportunities facing businesses in the plazas, and to engage business owners in community development. ANC was interested in a process that would engage businesses, consumers and neighbours in shared issue analysis. This process would help to build participation in strategies aimed at improving the impact of the plazas on the community and enhancing their contributions to the health of the neighbourhood.

This study contributes to the sparse literature on the role of suburban shopping plazas in immigrants' entrepreneurship, and points to ways of engaging small culturally-embedded businesses in local community development. It identifies opportunities and challenges facing businesses in Scarborough Village plazas, and provides valuable insight into issues of customer relations, marketing, safety and appearance of the plazas. It provides an opportunity and a basis for collective action by business owners and residents.

We strongly recommend that other community engagement processes pursue a retail business strategy, as it has had wide ranging benefits for the ANC project in Scarborough Village. ANC has been able to connect business owners with residents, and facilitate collective work on issues affecting the plazas, and involved business owners in working towards larger community projects.

Another major strength of this research process is the engagement model used by ANC. Community animators (residents hired by ANC) were the initial point of contact with businesses, and were well received by business owners as they were often customers and communicated in the language most familiar to the retailer. These individuals were also very important in providing continuity to the process, as they accompanied different ANC staff and student researchers into the businesses over the research process and the subsequent community activities. The success of the engagement process, in large part, can be traced back to the community animators.

Some of its limitations include the small sample size used and the length of time between the initial engagement and follow-up with the results of the study. Other limitations are outlined in the last section of the report.

This study has proven to be a significant asset in the community development work of the Action for Neighbourhood Change project, as well as a valuable learning tool on issues related to economic vitality. None of ANC's activities have so strongly galvanized the business community.

As a result of this engagement work with the businesses, several retailers have become actively involved in ANC's work. Plaza appearance was a key theme that emerged from this study, and in April 2006, business owners and residents participated in two community clean-up days that focused on the plazas. The other major concern that this study identified was safety in the plazas. Business owners are now working with residents through ANC to do a safety audit and want to collectively approach the police to increase their presence in the plazas. Motivated and community-minded business owners have worked with ANC to mobilize other businesses, and have started working towards noticeable change in the plazas.

Overall, the plaza project has done community-based research through an engagement model that has mobilized and empowered business owners in the plazas to start working on positive changes in the neighbourhood. The results of this engagement are still being seen, as business owners now participate regularly in ANC activities, and are working collaboratively with residents on issues that affect the whole community.

Sincerely,

Sharmila Shewprasad and Sean Meagher

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## Executive Summary

The study examined businesses in shopping plazas in Scarborough Village through an engagement process that was conducted as part of the Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) project. Given the prominence of ethnic businesses within local and cultural communities, and the prominent place plazas play in the physical landscape of the neighbourhood, this process is an important aspect of ANC's community engagement strategy.

**Goals of the project:** The business outreach project was designed to:

- Explore the role of a particular kind of plaza within the neighbourhood;
- Understand the challenges and opportunities facing businesses and business owners in the plazas;
- Engage business owners in working together for overall improvement in the neighbourhood; and
- Engage residents, both tenants and homeowners, in shaping the role of plazas within their respective communities and to contribute to the plazas' role as a community asset.

**Findings of the study:** The study's findings fall into four general categories.

- Opportunity: There is evidence that indicates that ethno-specific businesses in Toronto's inner suburbs can be highly successful if they pursue appropriate strategies.
- Community Embeddedness: Many small businesses in Scarborough Village have strong relationships with their ethno-cultural communities, which research correlates with higher levels of business success.
- Market Diversification: Most store owners stated that their own experiences reflected what the literature has proven: Good community ties help ethnic entrepreneurs, but over-reliance on a small demographic or ethnic market limits growth and long-term success.
- Aesthetics: Both business owners and residents recognized a need to attract people to the stores by making them more appealing to passers-by and as a key element in expanding the customer base.
- Safety: The perception of the plazas as unsafe places was identified as an issue but was not as significant as the need for a clean and welcoming environment.

### Immediate next steps

- The findings of this report has been distributed to businesses in the plazas.
- ANC staff will continue to reach out to businesses who want to participate in joint efforts to improve the plazas.
- ANC will schedule meetings for business owners in the plazas, owners of the plazas and residents who participated in the focus groups to review the findings of the study in order to focus on strategies for change and overall business improvement.



## 1. Introduction

Action for Neighbourhood Change (ANC) is a national program being carried out in one neighbourhood in each of five Canadian cities, including Scarborough Village in Toronto. It is funded by the federal government and administered by the United Way, both nationally and at each of the five sites. The program works with all of the people in the area — residents, businesses, and organizations — to build on their strengths and tackle barriers and challenges in order to make their neighbourhoods stronger and healthier. It responds to the issues and priorities identified by the community. The project works to connect with people, ask the appropriate questions, and share information that will help people respond and organize.

Scarborough Village is an established suburb in eastern Toronto that was developed as a middle-income community after the Second World War. Originally designed for low-density single-family residential development, the community is now a mix of detached houses, social housing complexes and high-rise apartment buildings. Typical of Toronto's suburbs, shopping plazas (also described as "strip malls") line major streets in the neighbourhood, and are concentrated at major intersections. Some plazas are new, well kept and contain chain retail and food stores. Others are older, in various states of repair, and tend to house small, family-run businesses that cater to particular cultural markets within the area.

Like many inner suburbs across Toronto, Scarborough Village has served as a settlement community for immigrants. Home to a predominantly Eastern European population in the 1960s and 1970s, the neighbourhood witnessed a number of shifts in immigration patterns during the 1990s, with increasing numbers of South Asian and West Asian immigrants within the past five years.

Starting in May 2005, ANC's engagement has focused on several streams of outreach, including work within particular ethno-cultural communities and within apartment buildings and other sites in the community, such as schools. The outreach to businesses in the plazas is one part of this broader strategy.

This report extends the process of issue identification and engagement to explore the dynamics affecting plazas, both as economic elements of the community and as social elements (through their role as public spaces). The report explores these issues through a review of literature on the topic, through interviews with business owners and through focus groups with residents and customers. It reflects on the issues raised and identifies areas of potential action.

The business outreach project was designed to explore the role of plazas within the neighbourhood, to understand the challenges and opportunities facing businesses in the plazas, and to engage business owners in community development. ANC was interested in a process that would engage businesses, consumers and neighbours in shared issue analysis. This process could help to build participation in strategies aimed at improving the impact of the plazas on the community and enhancing their contributions to the health of the neighbourhood.

The research and engagement project was undertaken in the fall of 2005 by ANC staff and a team of three MA students studying Urban Planning at the University of Toronto as part of a course entitled "Workshop in Planning Practice." The students worked with ANC staff and community animators (residents hired to do outreach for ANC) during the fall, conducting interviews and focus groups with business owners

and residents. The overall reception of business owners was positive, and the research identified key areas of strengths and concerns within and about the plazas.

Shopping plazas have the potential to be a sustainable asset to the neighbourhood, economically and socially, and are points of community building. Ethnic businesses play a crucial role as points of access to culturally specific products, sites for information, and space for community formation/interaction. This study was designed to explore ways to support that role.

As a result of this study, the ANC project identified specific supports that these businesses need and specific opportunities they can take advantage of. This report explores some of the suggestions from business owners and residents on how to improve businesses in the plazas in Scarborough Village.

## **2. Literature Review**

Immigrants are playing an increasingly large role in the entrepreneurial landscapes of North American cities, and entrepreneurship within immigrant communities has been shown to play an important role in shaping local community-level economies. Two main sets of literature were examined in preparation for this research project: literature on suburban mall development and literature on immigrants' entrepreneurship in metropolitan areas in North America, with a particular emphasis on suburban Toronto.

The terms 'ethnic entrepreneurship' and 'ethnic business' have been used consistently in this literature to refer to business activities by non-white, first generation immigrant business owners who are racially or linguistically different from the dominant business community. For instance, some of the literature examined in this report refers to 'ethnic entrepreneurship' in Toronto's Chinese, Portuguese or Black communities. While an unusual and somewhat unhelpful term, this has become the standard reference in the literature and is employed here in some instances.

This area of entrepreneurship has been the subject of significant research within the Toronto context over the past 15 years. Specifically, the literature has examined the relationship between culture, community formation and entrepreneurship.

### **2.1 Ethnic Plazas and Malls: The Case of north Scarborough and Markham**

There are a number of studies on what the literature has referred to as "Asian malls" in north Scarborough and Markham. Wallace (1999) looks at diversity and planning in Markham, a suburb of Toronto located north of Scarborough. A major development trend in this affluent area during the 1990s was the emergence of retail condominium developments focussed on East Asian (mainly Chinese) markets, or "Asian malls."

While some of these retail condominiums are converted plazas, many are purpose-built enclosed structures that offer a wide mix of retail, service and entertainment options. The malls are distinguished by above-average densities and significant investment in storefronts and flooring to discourage the appearance of bargain stores. The changing demographics in north Scarborough and Markham have resulted in a robust market for Chinese goods and services. Qadeer (1998) claims that the rise of these Chinese malls can essentially be attributed to keen entrepreneurship supported by strong demand.

Most of the developers are small- to medium-sized family firms. Qadeer (1998) reports that about 80% of customers are Chinese. About half of the Chinese customers come from across Toronto, and about 40% from surrounding neighbourhoods. The malls thus have neighbourhood and regional functions, and significant diversification in their customer base. Qadeer points out that the malls have largely succeeded because there are many mainstream shopping facilities around them. He emphasizes that the integration of ethnic malls into local communities requires a careful balancing of shopping and social needs of all groups. He suggests that, through design guidelines and economic development strategies, urban plans can help establish this balance by recognizing the distinctness of plazas with significant numbers of businesses focused on specific ethno-cultural groups and integrating these plazas into area-wide commercial systems.

The case of the Chinese community in north Scarborough is worth exploring as an example of one kind of ethnic entrepreneurship in suburban Toronto. These

developments have identified and negotiated a number of factors that are relevant to this study. First, mixed development is more attractive to customers and homogenization of business types leads to a smaller customer base. The presence of mainstream stores draws a wider range of customers. Second, customers are more willing to shop in stores that are aesthetically pleasing and appear clean and well maintained. Third, a development plan that creates a strategy for the constellation of stores in the area can help to ensure diversification of the customer base.

## **2.2 Entrepreneurship in Immigrant Communities**

The businesses examined in recent studies on ethnic entrepreneurship tend to contrast with the example of Chinese entrepreneurship in a few ways: they tend to be smaller and less well financed, have fewer customers and represent immigrant communities that are less well established.

Entrepreneurship in immigrant communities depends on various factors, which the literature broadly groups into three categories (Aldridge and Waldinger 1990, Gamal and Galt 2003, Teixeira 2001). They are:

- Opportunity structures, which describe the context in which ethnic entrepreneurs operate and which create (or restrict) opportunities for them;
- Group characteristics, including culture, social networks and settlement patterns; and
- Ethnic strategies of adaptation.

### Opportunity Structures

The literature indicates that ethnic entrepreneurs often have fewer mainstream opportunity structures.

- Barriers to obtaining loans or credit make it difficult for some groups to establish and maintain businesses. Teixeira (2001) notes that 51.7% of business owners in his study named access to financing as a major barrier to establishing a business.
- Systemic barriers to mainstream business and professional jobs often lead members of ethnic communities to establish businesses, even if they do not have a strong inclination to entrepreneurialism (Menzies et al 2003).
- Discrimination by suppliers was also listed in Teixeira's (2001) study as a moderate barrier.
- Unfamiliarity with English often limits the ability of ethnic entrepreneurs to negotiate fair structures relating to their businesses.
- Ethnic entrepreneurs often have difficulties accessing information about setting up a business, regulations governing business developments and related information, such as financial planning. Teixeira (2001) found that 63% of business owners in the Portuguese community rely on sources of information from within the Portuguese community, and use broadly accessible English-speaking organizations and institutions only 7% of the time. This implies that these business owners may not be familiar with what are often seen as "mainstream" organizations and institutions that provide business related information, and that mainstream organizations and institutions have not made culturally and linguistically appropriate information available to immigrant entrepreneurs.

The difficulties of navigating an often unfamiliar and sometimes hostile economic environment become significant barriers for ethnic entrepreneurs, undermining the success of their businesses and the communities in which they are located.

### Group Characteristics

Small entrepreneurs often depend on socially meaningful relationships within their ethnic or personal community in order to help them start a business. New immigrants sometimes locate their businesses in an ethnic community because they can expand their contacts and social networks and share information more easily (Salaff et al. 2002).

The role of ethnic businesses in immigrant communities takes different forms in geographically-bound (or enclave) neighbourhoods and within the city-wide immigrant communities, but in both cases successful businesses show high levels of embeddedness. For instance, Teixeira's (2001) research on Black and Portuguese entrepreneurs in Toronto shows that ethnic business leaders often play a large social role in geographically stable communities, such as the Portuguese community along College St.

In immigrant communities that are more dispersed and suburbanized, ethnic entrepreneurs play a similar or more important role in non-geographic community formation. In the Black community, Teixeira (2001) found that there is a higher level of business owner involvement in the socio-cultural life of the community, higher embeddedness of the businesses in the community, and a higher level of participation in the religious life of the ethno-cultural community. The author implicitly argues that this level embeddedness in the local community is necessary within ethnic businesses, because it provides significant opportunity for marketing, business promotion and social networking within the immigrant community.

Teixeira (2001) also found a high level of dependence on ethno-specific criteria in hiring, either relying more heavily on social networks for hiring, as 43% of Black entrepreneurs did, or placing a high priority on shared ethnic background, as 85% of Portuguese entrepreneurs did. Ethnic entrepreneurs in Teixeira's study believed they needed employees who were familiar with the language and culture of their core clients and shared a sense of identity and trust with them.

### Ethnic Strategies of Adaptation

Menzies et al. (2003) attempt to develop an Index of Ethnic Involvement based on the level of the entrepreneur's personal and business involvement in the immigrant community. The aim of the study is to determine what differences in personal and business characteristics exist according to their level of involvement within the ethnic community. Through a sample of ethnic entrepreneurs in three cities in Canada (Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto) the authors were able to find out what factors encouraged entrepreneurs to rely on ethnic involvement and social networks in their community. The study found that:

- Years of work experience and immigration status were strong predictors of ethnic business involvement. New immigrants who started businesses were found to rely more heavily on involvement within their communities than persons who have lived in Canada for a longer period.

- It was also found that the longer the business was established in Canada, the lower the ethnic community involvement.
- Immigrants who are entrepreneurs face constraints that consistently inhibit their success relative to mainstream businesses. Such factors include the lack of social capital, financial capital, language barriers and limited markets.
- Higher educational qualifications enhance both the likelihood of becoming an entrepreneur and the chances for success.
- Class resources, such as capital for start-up, education and previous experience, are more important to immigrants' business success than ethnic involvement.

Menzies et al. (2003) demonstrate that high levels of ethnic involvement show a lower level of options and opportunities, suggesting that ethnic involvement may be a base need for establishing immigrant-owned businesses. However, it can also be a constraint on their growth and success.

### **2.3 Summary of findings from the literature**

- Immigrant businesses have been successful in Scarborough and across Toronto. One element of that success is a high level of involvement in their ethno-cultural communities, increasing their prominence and the level of awareness among their key target market. This is especially important when communities are diffuse and customers have to be attracted over greater distances.
- Most successful suburban ethno-specific plazas avoid over reliance on customers from a single ethno-cultural community. They diversify their base of customers beyond a single ethno-cultural market by attracting new non-ethno-specific businesses and attracting a portion of their customers from outside their core market.
- Over-reliance on ethno-specific strategies limits business growth. Successful immigrant-owner businesses ultimately decrease their dependence on ethno-specific market and ethnic involvement.
- Strategies for hiring employees reflect a tendency of over-reliance on ethno-specific strategies, restricting their capacity to diversify their customer base.
- Business owners who are recent immigrants face many other barriers to success
  - There is more difficulty in accessing financial capital.
  - Language and institutional barriers restrict their access to information.
  - Language barriers restrict their range of potential suppliers.
- The range of business types also requires diversification. Ethno-specific businesses have narrower markets and fragmenting those markets further makes individual operators within plazas less viable.

### **2.4 Business Improvement Areas (BIAs)**

Many of the factors and strategies identified in the literature point to cooperative strategies among businesses, a phenomenon often associated with the formation of Business Improvement Areas (BIA).

A Business Improvement Area, or Business Improvement District (BID) in the United States, is an association of local businesses and property owners who come together, with the support of the local municipality, to organize, finance and carry out improvements in their neighbourhood. These projects can include better security, street lighting, grounds maintenance, landscaping, streetscape improvements and community festivals. Some BIAs also organize larger projects like local economic development and marketing campaigns.

Toronto has a strong tradition of supporting these partnerships. In fact, Toronto was the first city to witness the appearance of BIAs in 1965, and the concept has since spread throughout North America. Today there are over 52 BIAs operating within the City of Toronto alone.

In Toronto, the formation of a BIA depends upon the initiative of local businesses and property owners, who must elect a volunteer Board of Management and receive approval from City Council. The city levies a small, mandatory fee based on the taxes of each commercial and industrial property owner who is located inside the BIA boundaries. The money collected is used to implement the programs developed by the Board.

According to Symes and Steel (2003), the hardest part of the BIA process is the initial establishment. Challenges include:

- Setting rules
- Getting people to believe that the concept will work (motivated to join)
- Overcoming legal and administrative problems
- Showing that the money being collected will benefit the community

One of the suggestions that authors have developed for improving the operation and development of BIAs is to start small. One of the best ways to convince businesses and BID members that their investment is worthwhile is to start by implementing quick and do-able projects that are visible to the community. Other recommendations include keeping rules and procedures to a minimum, using performance measurements to ensure that goals are being met, and adhering to legal agreements.

A review of some of the literature reveals several potential advantages of BIAs:

- Improving the physical condition of the area
- Attracting customers to local businesses through collective marketing campaigns
- Attracting new business and investment by creating a "first point of contact" for people interested in investing in the area
- Reversing a negative image
- Harnessing entrepreneurialism and innovation
- Ensuring stable funding for community and business development
- Empowering local business owners to affect local change
- Providing a forum for community discussion and harnessing local social capital
- Restoring a sense of community and a sense of place

As is evident from this list, BIAs offer a number of advantages to both local businesses and the larger community. However, the literature also identifies a number of potential drawbacks to BIAs, including:

- Excluding those businesses that cannot afford fees
- Unintentional impacts on tenants and owners due to increased rents/taxes resulting from local improvements
- Reluctance of local government to collect fees from reluctant business owners
- Moving problems from one area of the community to another
- Potential infighting among BIA members
- Lack of resident participation in BIAs

In summary, BIAs appear to be involved and somewhat advanced level of business cooperation that requires a high level of commitment from local businesses.

### 3. The Plazas and the Engagement Process

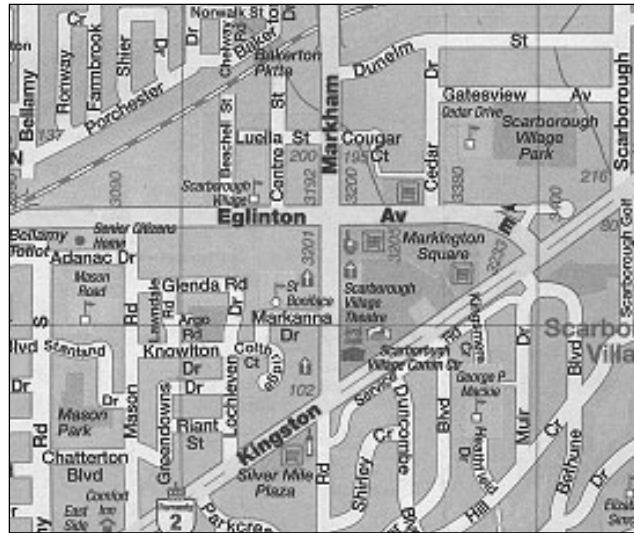
#### 3.1 Scarborough Village

Seventy-two percent of Scarborough Village's 13,725 residents are people of colour, and of the 8,372 residents who were born outside of Canada, 64% arrived between 1991 and 2001. Fifteen percent of Scarborough Village's residents speak Tamil, and 5% speak Urdu.

The average annual income of residents is \$17,216 (compared to the Toronto average of \$23,491) and 18.6% rely on some form of government transfer – a figure which is double the amount collected by other members of Toronto's working population.

Residents live mainly in apartment buildings of more than five stories. Some 83% live in this type of dwelling (compared with 38% in the rest of the city) and 72% rent their homes (49% of Torontonians do so). Overall, the neighbourhood's children (ages 5 to 14) and young adults (ages 24 to 44) are the largest demographic cohorts, representing respectively 18% and 31% of the population. Fewer neighbourhood residents own cars and more rely on public transit when compared to the rest of the city.

In the ANC project area in Scarborough Village, there are approximately 10 shopping plazas. The study area was narrowed to four plazas around the intersection of Markham Road and Eglinton Avenue. These plazas have a number of common elements: they appeared to be local, family-owned businesses; a majority of the stores in these plazas appeared to serve particular ethno-cultural communities; and these plazas seemed to be less well maintained than plazas containing widely known chain stores where English is the predominant language.



Retail businesses tend to occupy the street-level units in the plazas; however, other service-oriented businesses such as income tax and money-lending services, tend to occupy the upper floors. Many units also had access to a basement floor, which were put to a variety of uses. The plazas contain a mix of businesses which reflect the history of the community. Some businesses serving Eastern European communities remain in the plazas, although the majority of retail stores serve newer communities in the neighbourhood.

There are different kinds of ownership arrangements in the plazas. In “single owner plazas” the entire complex is owned by one landlord and each unit is rented by the business occupying the space.

Common areas such as parking lots in these plazas are the responsibility of a single landlord, and there is more incentive to work on these areas to attract more stores as tenants and more customers to the plaza in general. In “condominium” plazas, each store is owned by the business occupying the space.

Because of the individual ownership of each unit, collective activity on common areas such as parking lots is less likely, as the collective decision making structures are more complex. In single owner plazas, businesses can appeal to a landlord about building standards, but in condominium plazas, collective action on common areas often requires a successful strategy of persuading over all owners to make investments at the same time. In the sample of four plazas in Scarborough Village, there were three single owned plazas, and one condominium plaza.

Primary market of Retailer	
European	9
West Indian	8
Tamil	13
Urdu	5
Bengali	1
Mixed	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>

In the plazas in the study area, there were 48 street level businesses. Restaurants were by far the most common type of business in the plazas. The businesses are representative of the ethno-cultural communities living in Scarborough Village, with a large number of businesses that primarily serve Tamil, Urdu and Bengali speaking groups. This tally represents businesses that indicate on their signs, menus or window displays that they serve a particular community. Businesses in the mixed category include convenience stores and medical clinics—it can be speculated that while these businesses do not claim to serve a particular community, their location and availability lead to more customers from local groups least able to travel longer distances.

Type of Retailer	
Cleaning/Laundry	2
Clothing	3
Convenience	2
Grocery	6
Hair/nail	2
Jewellery	3
Medical/pharmacy	5
Money lender	2
Restaurant	17
Video store	3
Other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>

### 3.2 The Engagement Process

The engagement process with business owners in the community started in October 2005. ANC community animators played a key role in the business engagement project. Community animators are residents of the neighbourhood who are employed as front line workers in the engagement process to do outreach to their communities and population groups.

Three ANC community animators worked with an ANC staff member in the initial outreach and survey of businesses. In the initial round of outreach, most businesses in the study area (40 out of 48) were approached, informed about the ANC project, and asked to participate in the research project on the plazas. Some business owners were reluctant while others were very interested in talking about their businesses and to share their opinions on the plazas. The animators were an important part of this outreach, as they shopped at some of these stores, and were known to a number of business owners as regular customers. Businesses with Tamil

and Urdu-speaking owners were more responsive to someone describing the project in those languages.

Business owners and animators expressed lack of comfort with the idea of a 'research' project on the plazas. People did not want to be researched, but wanted to be involved in a project that would bring about recognizable positive change in the community. Business owners were willing to talk about their businesses, and their ideas for community improvement. However, the idea of being subjects of a research project by students from the University of Toronto was not a welcome one. This was identified early on in the process, and the focus of the work was then shifted to stress the action-focused nature of the project, and the association with ANC was strengthened.

An unexpected positive factor in interactions with businesses was the location of the ANC office, which occupies a street level storefront unit in one of the plazas in the study area. This served as a point of commonality and interest for business owners who had seen the ANC office move in a few months earlier and were curious about the project. ANC's presence in the plazas often provided a conversation starter and led to some relationships with business owners in the plazas. The location of the ANC office was an initial point of contact, facilitated an easier interaction with businesses, and suggested to the business owners that ANC staff were familiar with the daily activities and routines of the plazas.

Knowing that the urban planning students would only be working on the project for the fall term, ANC staff chose to do the initial outreach without the presence of the students. This groundwork allowed the possibility for continuity after the students' involvement was over, since much of the on-the-ground engagement would happen after the findings of the students' project were compiled.

The second stage of engagement involved the urban planning students' project. Given the learnings in the first stage of engagement, ANC staff members ran a workshop with the students on interview techniques, reviewed the interview script, and placed particular emphasis on collecting data that would be the basis for ANC's meeting with business owners in the plazas. The students tended to approach the process with a research focus. ANC staff had identified the barriers to that approach and encouraged the embedding of the data gathering process in an outreach approach.

The students interviewed 13 business owners over a 2-week period. There were some constraints on the number of interviews that the students were able to do because of their class deadlines. The interviews were done by a team of one student and one community animator, generally an animator who spoke the language of most familiarity of the business owner. The students report that this approach was very helpful, and facilitated an easier access to the business owners.

The third stage of engagement involved focus groups with residents conducted by the urban planning students. Four focus groups were conducted over a two-week period in November. In total, 28 residents participated in the focus groups; residents were both homeowners and apartment dwellers. Participants were recruited by community animators through posted fliers and social networks. A small honorarium was paid to residents for their participation. The focus group discussions were held in the evening, at the ANC office in the plazas.

Participants were consulted on their usage of the plazas, their opinions on the stores, strengths and weaknesses of the plazas, and their suggestions for change and development of the businesses in the plazas. Again, community animators played an important role in recruiting residents for these focus groups. While the sample size is not random enough to make generalized conclusions of people's feelings towards the plazas, it is a good indicator of the role of the plazas in some residents' lives.

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1 Business Owners

The sample size of 13 businesses is a small representation of the businesses the plazas. The sample was chosen mainly based on availability of the owner at the time of the visits, which were often done in the late morning. Some interviews were conducted in Tamil and Urdu, and translated by the community animator. The sample represents a good cross-section of the business community: there is a mix of category of retailer, community served, and representation from all four plazas in the research area.

Length of time in the area ranged from one month to thirty years. Removing both of these outliers, the average length of time for businesses in their current location was 3.6 years. This figure may understate the actual years of business operation: at least two of the business owners surveyed had taken over from previously established businesses. Only three of the business owners claimed that neither they nor their employees (family members, in many cases) lived in the area, indicating strong informal ties and embeddedness in the local community.

Interviews were conducted with a broad range of businesses serving several different communities. Residents in the focus groups often felt that the main strength of the plazas were the specialty goods that served specific communities. The large number of grocery-style businesses surveyed reflects both their prominent place in the plazas and the willingness of owners to participate. The ethno-cultural groupings generally reflect the makeup of the retailers as well.

Primary Market	
Urdu	2
West Indian	1
Tamil	4
Bangladeshi	1
European	1
Mixed	4
Total	13

Seven of the 13 business owners said that they have informal relationships with neighbouring businesses. While only six business owners were interested in establishing a formal Business Improvement Area, ten business owners expressed an interest in attending a meeting with other business owners hosted by ANC. It seems that while many would be willing to get involved on an informal, non-committal basis, the idea of a formal association with strict obligations is not very appealing. Furthermore, many business owners were initially hesitant about attending a meeting with their fellow business owners in the plazas until assurances were provided that some practical good could come of the meeting.

Type of Retailer	
Cleaners	1
Restaurant	2
Medical/pharmacy	3
Clothing/textile	1
Grocery/deli	6
Total	13

Business owners mentioned several advantages of their location in the plazas, including the friendliness of residents and neighbouring businesses. By far the most frequently mentioned strength was the large local customer base for their products, which are generally targeted at specific ethnic groups in the community. In visiting the shops, it became apparent to the researchers that most transactions in South Asian stores take place in the language of the customer base.

#### 4.1.1. Challenges identified by business owners

The challenges facing business owners were divided into some general, non-exclusive categories: safety, economics, maintenance, and wider community concerns. Clearly, there is a great deal of overlap between these rough groupings: safety perceptions are also a customer relations issue, and a lack of customers translates into an economic issue.

### Safety

There were different levels of concern about safety. Six business owners reported no concerns about safety, and were comfortable with their businesses' security measures. Some of these businesses reported trouble with safety about 5 years ago but said that there had been significant improvement in recent years.

Other business owners express a great deal of concern about safety. Two business owners report that they close their businesses early because of safety concerns. One business owner said that it is difficult to stay open beyond 7 pm, as her business does, because all of the surrounding stores are closed and dark. Customers are less likely to come, and there is an issue of safety for the store owner and employees if neighbouring businesses are closed. Some owners wanted to see more security measures in place, such as security guards and better lighting. One business owner was very concerned about safety and said that the police do not always respond to her calls.

It is interesting to note that, with one exception, the six businesses reporting no concerns about safety were located in plazas along Markham Road. The retailers who had significant concerns about safety were located in plazas along Eglinton Avenue. This is an area of further exploration with business owners, as the plazas along Eglinton Avenue have had a different history of safety and violence than the plazas along Markham Road.

While there was a divergence in opinion about the safety of their stores, business owners agreed that the plazas (both along Markham Road and Eglinton Ave.) were *perceived* as being unsafe, which made some customers uncomfortable shopping there. Related to this was the observation that "people hanging out" in the plazas, although they may not pose an actual threat, may contribute to negative perceptions of the plazas. Some business owners linked the image of safety in the plazas with overall community safety, arguing that if the community as a whole was seen as a safer place, then people would feel safer shopping in the plazas.

### Care and Maintenance

The second most common suggestion for change in the plazas was related to infrastructure. In interviews with 13 business owners, there were 12 separate suggestions for change in the care and maintenance of the plazas relating to cleaning, repairs, landscaping and visibility.

The most frequent suggestions in this area were related to maintenance and parking lots. Most business owners were concerned about maintenance in the plazas and around their stores, including better garbage removal, litter in the areas surrounding the stores, and repair to potholes in the parking lots. Related to parking lots, a few business owners talked about the lack of availability of parking for their customers.

There were three suggestions for landscaping improvements such as greenery, flowers and benches. It was suggested that these landscaping changes are needed

because there is too much pavement, and greenery would improve the attractiveness of the plazas.

Two business owners wanted better signage for their stores, arguing that the signs need to be brighter, more visible, and convey more information.

#### Local market trends

Some stores aimed at particular ethnic communities report reduction or loss of business because their clientele is moving out of the community. This was not surprising for the stores catering to the Eastern European community, since members of that group have been moving out of the neighbourhood; however, this was also reported by two Tamil businesses. This may be due to over-saturation of Tamil grocery stores and restaurants in the plazas or limitations on their ability to "capture" new Tamil clients as their established clients move away and are replaced by newer immigrants.

On the other hand, the one Bengali business interviewed reported good sales because the store is the only Bengali business in an area with a recently arrived and growing Bangladeshi community. Two Tamil businesses were happy that there were other Tamil businesses in the plazas because their combined presence drew more customers to the plazas, both from within and outside of the Scarborough Village neighbourhood. These two business owners are located in a plaza where there is a large Tamil presence, but where the businesses do not offer similar services. Conversely, some business owners in other plazas thought that there were too many similar stores in the plazas which led to a decrease in business for those retailers.

#### Customer base

Six business owners were satisfied with their customers and their level of business. Seven expressed the need to expand their customer base. The business owners who were satisfied with their customer base were two doctors' offices, a pharmacy, a new restaurant, and two key grocery stores which were anchors in their respective plazas. The doctors and pharmacy provided a key service and were always quite busy. The two key anchor stores were also well-established and busy.

Of the seven businesses that expressed dissatisfaction with their customer base, all serve a particular ethnic community. Several ethno-specific businesses were interested in expanding their base of customers to the wider community. Business owners who served specific ethnic communities thought that a wider range of people, both ethnically similar people from outside Scarborough Village and ethnically different people from within Scarborough Village, would be more likely to come to stores if they knew more about the businesses, if they knew how friendly the service was, and if they knew about the kinds of products offered. Most businesses wanted customers from outside their current base, and were interested in attracting a wider range of clientele.

Some business owners point to lack of advertising of stores in the plazas and lack of knowledge in the community in general about stores in the plazas. Other owners had suggestions for improving business in the plazas, such as coming together with other businesses to have advertising for the plazas. Others thought that the plazas need to attract businesses catering to a higher income group, which would draw more money into the plazas as a whole.

Three business owners thought that higher quality businesses would attract a wider base of customers. Business owners, such as medical clinics, who served a mix of people in the community, agreed that it was necessary to reach out to everyone in the community, and report taking measures such as hiring people who spoke appropriate languages to reach out to particular groups.

#### Supports for business owners

Two business owners reported that they needed help navigating business support systems and suggested that new businesses needed help accessing information and knowing where to find services and information on financial capital. One business owner suggested that because businesses are struggling, owners don't have time and resources to access information. It is also difficult for owners to access this information because of language barriers. Another business owner suggested that support on business improvements could come from landlords in the form of sharing the costs for building and plaza improvements and electricity for better lighting.

#### **4.1.2 Summary of findings from business owners**

In general retailers were concerned about: safety, maintenance, local markets, their customer base and supports for business owners. About half of business owners were very concerned about the safety of their stores, but all business owners are very concerned about perceptions of safety, which they link to a lack of customers. Most business owners expressed concerns about maintenance, including litter and garbage removal, and improvements to landscaping. In terms of the local market, some businesses report loss of clientele due to customers moving out of the community. Others report over-saturation of the ethno-specific market for certain types of stores. As a result, over half of the businesses, mostly smaller, less-well established retailers, wanted to expand their customer base beyond their primary market. The business owners identified strategies such as better advertising or attracting a higher income group. Finally, a small number of business owners talked about access to supports for business owners, including services and information on accessing financial capital. Each business interviewed in this study was asked about their interest in a BIA. Many business owners wanted to start with more informal meetings, but had reservations about the more formal structure of a BIA.

#### **4.2 Residents**

Focus groups were held with residents of the area (both tenants and homeowners) to discuss their likes and dislikes about the plazas. They also discussed what changes would draw residents to the plazas. The wider goal of the focus groups was to frame the possibility of collective action and to understand how different groups of residents viewed and used the plazas.

Participants in the sessions were separated based on their residential status and gender. This yielded four groups: female tenants, male tenants, female homeowners, and male homeowners. Age and ethnicity factors were not controlled for. Though the recruiting process ensured some ethnic diversity, the fact that the focus groups were conducted in English may have excluded some people from participating. As it turned out, while there were no distinct gender patterns in the responses, there were some notable divisions between tenants and homeowners. External appearance was a concern for all groups, but there were distinctions about other aspects of the malls

that tended to reflect the fact that homeowners were less frequent users of the plazas.

For those residents who did shop in the plazas, the major attraction was the variety of speciality goods that they could only find in the plazas. Access to ethno-specific products was a major advantage for stores in the plazas. Some tenants were also attracted by the low prices and proximity of the plazas.

Homeowners identified some more abstract benefits of the plazas, including the fact that they reflect the local community and provide opportunities for small businesses, but criticisms of the plazas significantly outnumber words of praise.

#### **4.2.1 Challenges identified by residents**

Residents' concerns about the plazas can also be divided into the following general areas.

##### Appearance of Public Spaces

Concerns about the space of the plazas included exterior and interior appearance, signage, usage of external spaces and usage of space for community services. Both tenants and homeowners described the appearance of the plazas as "run-down", "dumpy", or "unattractive". While tenants spoke of both interior and exterior issues, homeowners (who were less likely to be frequent users of the plazas) tended to focus on the exterior conditions. The stores' organization was a key issue for tenants, who complained that they often could not find what they wanted. Tenants pointed out that better labelling and less crowding would help overcome these problems. Tenants felt that better labelling would help the stores look cleaner and more attractive on the inside.

In terms of exterior appearance, all residents felt that the plazas lacked visual appeal and were in need of repairs and maintenance. Some suggestions included painting, landscaping, murals, and putting in benches. Three of the four groups expressed concerns over the poor condition of the parking lots, and felt that paving and renovating the parking lots would go a long way towards making the plazas more appealing.

Residents also pointed out that exterior signage in the plazas is unattractive, inadequate and uninformative. They also gave examples of signs that were visually appealing and attractive such as the large and brightly lit signs of new chain stores at the corner of Markham and Eglinton.

The focus groups also discussed the usage of plaza space in episodic ways, such as seasonal decorations and events. One homeowner focus group suggested holding community events and festivals in the plazas as a way to both create a stronger sense of community and to attract business to the plazas. Residents thought that measures such as installing seating, flowers, and greenery would make the plazas more pleasant and more likely to be used as accessible public space by a variety of residents.

##### Safety

Residents also identified safety as a common issue in the plazas. All focus groups discussed this issue, some at great length. Concerns can be grouped in terms of perception and issues.

### *Perceptions*

People who visited the plazas regularly and those who rarely visited the plazas agree that the plazas are perceived as unsafe. However, most residents did not seem to feel that safety was really a factor in their decision not to shop in the plazas. The plazas have a reputation of being unsafe, but safety on its own was not the primary deterrent from plaza usage.

Two focus groups raised a concern about the poor perceptions of Scarborough as a whole, due to media reports, which causes specific incidents to be generalized to the whole area. Residents felt that more attention should be paid to differentiating between locations within Scarborough, to avoid this type of oversimplification.

### *Issues*

The focus groups identified several issues related to safety, which they thought would improve the overall image of the plazas. Poor lighting was the number one safety related issue identified by the focus groups. Another issue was the 'people hanging out' in the plazas, which mostly referred to youth.

Residents felt that a stronger police presence would increase safety, while others pointed to more informal measures such as improving lighting, creating more inviting spaces, and encouraging more general activity in the area. A lack of security guards or police presence was identified as a major concern by two focus groups. Residents specifically felt that there should be more foot patrols in the area. One of the focus groups mentioned that foot patrols could be used as a way for police to interact with the community on a regular basis, which could help to increase trust between police and residents.

### Conditions in Stores

Residents talked about a few aspects of their shopping experiences in the plazas, and discussed ways that customer relations could be improved.

A few residents from the homeowner groups said that they sometimes feel unwelcome in the stores and some tenants suggested that small gestures such as a greeting would improve customer relations. They felt that aisles, shelves and prices could be better labelled. Some residents indicated that they prefer to shop at other stores that are more expensive and less convenient because those chain supermarkets appeared cleaner and the goods looked fresher.

Some homeowners said they were unfamiliar with the stores in the plazas and the goods they offered. They felt better advertising and signage would help solve this problem. They also felt that business owners could do better window displays that would inform customers about the goods offered in the stores and which would contribute to improving the overall appearance of the plazas.

Those residents who used the stores often, however, spoke highly of some aspects of customer relations in the stores they frequent. For instance, one resident mentioned that a number of the stores will deliver groceries to households in the neighbourhood.

It appears that some residents have excellent relationships with stores within their ethnic communities. However, people of dissimilar ethnic communities are unfamiliar and feel unwelcome in some stores.

### Retail Service Gaps

Residents identified several retail gaps in the plazas, including lack of banks, lack of variety, and the need for more services.

The biggest gap identified was a lack of banks. This was mentioned in all focus groups and residents felt strongly about this. Participants informed us that there used to be banks in the area but they had since moved away. In order to visit a bank, residents had to drive their cars or use public transit. This was a particular concern for the tenant groups, as they told us that they often had to rely on high fee ATMs or the local Money Mart because they could not access the more distant banks very often. It should be noted that when the residents were referring to banks, they were referring to full service bank branches, where they could conduct all their banking. Residents also noted that a bank would be a significant customer draw in the plazas.

A more general retail service gap that was identified by the local residents was the lack of variety in the plazas. Residents felt that if stores such as clothing stores, coffee shops, second hand stores, or even one or two familiar chain stores, were added to the plazas more people would shop there.

Most of the groups identified the plazas as spaces that could be used for community service provision. Some residents also felt that recreational and drop-in space for youth would be an asset in the plazas. In terms of health services, residents wanted to see clinics that were sensitive to cultural and linguistic needs. The employment services that were identified included government services like HRSDC, non-profit groups like Neighbourhood Link, and temporary employment agencies. Finally, one group also mentioned a lack of recreational opportunities and social support for seniors in the area, and suggested that seniors needed to be more integrated in the community.

#### **4.2.2 Summary of findings from residents**

Residents' concerns reflect several areas of congruency with business owner priorities. The appearance of the plazas is an issue that resonates with both groups. There is also an agreement that the service mix in the plazas may need some adjustment, and some residents offered the novel suggestion that community services could play a role here. Residents' responses reinforce the notion that ethno-specific retailers are not reaching beyond well-established, familiar markets, and that this is a barrier to success for the plaza. Public safety is an issue for shoppers, though they too recognize that some of the problem is in the perception. More tellingly, shoppers do not identify safety as the primary barrier to use of the plazas. It appears that familiarity with the stores, visual appeal and comfort play the biggest role in keeping customers away.

## 5. Key Issues and Next Steps

There were several areas of convergence between ideas put forward by business owners and those put forward by residents, and there are some strategies identified by both groups and within the literature review that could be of benefit to the plazas in Scarborough Village. The areas of confluence between business owners and customers include perceptions of safety, infrastructure and aesthetic concerns, and better communications and advertising. There are some specific actions that they can develop which will address some of these issues. All of these issues point to the need for collaboration among business owners in the plazas.

### Community Involvement

Many small businesses in Scarborough Village have engaged themselves in their communities and have strong relationships with the people inside their ethno-cultural groups. This is an important attraction for some customers and is identified in the literature as an important core element to ethnic entrepreneurial success.

Scarborough Village is a receiver community where the ethno-cultural mix in the area changes continuously. Ethnic involvement with such a community requires an ongoing strategy for engagement.

### Market Diversification

Most store owners have identified from their own experience what the literature has proven: good community ties may help ethnic entrepreneurs, but over-reliance on a small demographic or ethnic market limits growth and long term success. As some business owners identified, retailers in Scarborough Village have to identify strategies to diversify beyond the existing customer base.

Scarborough Village merchants have not consistently pursued communication and promotion efforts and some experience erosion of their local, ethno-specific customer base as a result. They also lack a formal strategy for informing people of their own ethno-cultural background who live outside the neighbourhood that culturally appropriate goods and services are available. The costs of independent advertising in ethno-specific publications may be too high, but the opportunity to promote the plaza as a whole as an ethno-specific destination may create an alternate option.

Because of the existing mix of stores serving different ethno-cultural communities in the plazas, marketing across *different* ethnic communities could ensure some measure of diversity in the customer base. There is also a need for a mechanism to attract people who do not use ethno-cultural criteria for selecting retail outlets. Signage and window displays are clearly identified areas of potential improvement. Event marketing is also an untapped opportunity. In-store strategies are also likely to be a part of the diversification. Aesthetic improvements in stores, improvements that make items easier to find and diversifying the staffing to be more accessible to a wider audience are all likely candidates for change.

Customers saw the inclusion of community services among the types of outlets located in the plazas as an attractive option that would increase activity in the plazas and diversify the range of people coming into the plazas. The addition of a bank is also a high priority for many customers but is challenging under the current banking system.

## Safety

Customers and business owners all shared the view that the plazas were perceived as unsafe, though not all agreed that this was an accurate assessment.

There was significant convergence around safety, and both business owners and residents identified the following as areas of action:

- Better lighting
- Increased presence of security

These are areas where landlords and business owners need to work together to discuss the provision of lighting and security services. Arranging for better lighting requires a one-time investment in lighting fixtures whereas security services may need an ongoing financial commitment.

The response to these concerns requires greater inter-store cooperation. Most respondents who had concerns about security felt that a police presence was a more desirable source of live security presence. The combined voices of merchants are much more likely to draw more visible policing than any single voice. Modest investments could improve lighting and cleanliness, but those investments are likely beyond the capacity of any individual store.

## Aesthetics

Aesthetic changes are critical elements of many of the strategies outlined above.

Attracting people to the stores by making them more appealing to passers by is clearly a key element in expanding the customer base. Homeowners in the area, generally the more affluent customers, were particularly disinclined to use stores in local plazas because of the lack of visual appeal and lack of awareness of goods and services in the malls.

Customers identified several traditional approaches to the promotion of the plazas and enhancement of visual appeal. Better signage is frequently mentioned. Customers specifically identified the lack of attractive street-related signs and also the lack of window displays that attract customers and show the services and goods available in the store. Special events hosted in the plazas, possibly on culturally significant days, could also provide event marketing opportunities and expand awareness of the services in the plaza.

Better cleaning in the plazas is another area of improving plaza appeal and enhancing the aesthetics. Plaza cleanups can best be achieved through collective action, as well.

Other areas of improvement include landscaping, greenery, flowers and benches, as well as filling potholes in the parking lots. These again are areas that would benefit from collective action.

In general, businesses are interested in tackling key areas of mutual concern together. However, business owners are wary of excessive obligations, making casual networks more attractive than formal ones. Less onerous projects more likely draw widespread support. There was cautious support for the idea of a BIA, but clearly more informal networks need to be established first.

### Areas of business development for business owners

Business owners are in need of some skills development and business strategies that may improve their businesses. Some of these are identified by the businesses themselves, such as access to information and supports, and better advertising.

- Based on the needs identified by business owners, a series of multi-lingual workshops on business development, specific to the context of ethnic businesses in the plazas, may be an area of future action.
- Business owners may also benefit from business-related English language training
- At the same time, business development materials need to be more accessible to business owners, either through translation or through more accessible language
- Business owners may be interested in the development of an overall marketing plan for the plazas based on a wide survey of residents. From the small sample of residents in the focus groups, it is apparent that customers have a keen sense of what improvements in marketing they would respond best to
- Residents seemed very interested in having community services located in the plazas. There is a chronic lack of space for community programs in Scarborough Village, and residents point to the plazas as accessible, visible and open spaces for service provision. The creation of community service spaces within the plazas may be mutually beneficial to residents and business owners, as it may increase traffic in the plazas and draw in a wider variety of customers to existing businesses.

#### **5.2 Immediate next steps**

- The findings of this report will be distributed to businesses in the plazas
- ANC staff will reach out to businesses in the area to facilitate a meeting and introduce the possibility of joint efforts at economic improvement
- ANC will continue to support local businesses in developing any community improvement strategy the identified.

## **Notes on Replication: Recommendations for Future Business Research Studies in Other Neighbourhoods**

This study has proven to be a significant asset in the community development work of the Action for Neighbourhood Change project, as well as a valuable learning tool on issues related to economic vitality. None of ANC's activities have so strongly galvanized the business community. Their interest and inclusion have enriched the project in several ways:

### Understanding the commercial environment

Working with the business leaders, even at this early stage, has allowed insights into the challenges they face and the barriers that inhibit a robust commercial setting serving low-income communities. The lack of affluent markets is a challenge but the impact of numerous indecipherable regulatory requirements confronting businesses owners already unfamiliar with the cultural expectations of their adopted country was surprising and daunting.

### Third party perspective

Local businesses are also observers of the local community. They have offered a new perspective on the events unfolding in the neighbourhood and enable more complex reflection on how the community development team analysis responds to unfolding events. Their perspectives on the growing disaffection of youth, social disorder and mounting community violence, have provided new insights.

### Communication

Business owners talk to people in the community every day. Some of the business owners engaged in this study have become living advertisements for community development, explaining the project to customers and linking interested shoppers from the area to the project.

### New social networks

In Scarborough Village the business owners and managers are strongly embedded in their cultural communities. The research suggests that is typical of newcomer communities. ANC's enhanced relationship with these local leaders has opened doors to more social networks and informal community infrastructure.

The business study posed some challenges and imposed some demands on the process that should be taken into account by anyone seeking to replicate it.

### Research

There is a wide body of literature on small business development, but very few sources on suburban plazas in Toronto. The scope of this research led to sources directly related to ethnic entrepreneurship in suburban Toronto, but that this was a limited body of publications.

### Research methodology

Short interviews with business owners were used rather than surveys. Interviews allowed ANC to explore attitudes, encourage discussion and establish long-term relationships with business owners. The two-way process allowed ANC to understand the perspectives of business owners, and allowed businesses to become more familiar with ANC.

### Timing

The businesses were visited in the mid-morning, which was a relatively slow time for most shops. However, some of the interviews were conducted while there were customers in the store and other interruptions, which distracted the business owner. It would be ideal to do the interview when the store is empty or if the business owner was interviewed in a time specifically set aside for the interviews.

### Animators

The use of local people from the community worked well. The community animators were well received in the stores and were key to encouraging business owners to agree to speak to the researchers.

### Continuity and sustainability

The animators also provided continuity in the engagement process, since the student researchers were interns at ANC for three months. A continuous process of engagement is needed with the businesses to lead to a sustainable relationship and to ensure participation of businesses in future efforts.

### Consent and other formalities

Because the interviews and focus groups were done by student researchers, a formal ethics process needed to be undertaken with the University of Toronto. Business owners had to give formal verbal consent, and focus group participants signed a lengthy disclaimer from the University of Toronto. These processes have the potential to skew attitudes and distort the results of the study, as researchers were only able to do interviews with informants who agreed to be interviewed through the lengthy consent process. More focussed consent processes would be more appropriate to this setting.

### Building trust

As a result of visits to businesses, several store owners asked the ANC team for assistance on various issues such as parking tickets and legal advice. ANC's show of goodwill was important in building trust with business owners, and following up on these requests and providing referrals in a timely manner led to a good relationship with the business owners.

### Presence and credibility

ANC's physical presence in the plazas was important in building credibility with business owners. ANC staff frequented their establishments, ordered food for community meetings from their businesses and established a daily presence in the plazas that was obvious to most store owners.

### Practical action

Business owners were not interested in talking to 'experts' but were interested in practical action. They wanted to see change and results, rather than be studied. Understanding this, the plaza engagement process was presented to business owners as a way of gathering data to develop concrete action plans for businesses in the plazas.

### Follow up

While this process was focused on gathering data, the action-oriented approach suggests that a follow-up meeting date should be provided during the interview phase to sustain the momentum generated by the interviews.

### Incentives

Resident participants in the focus groups were paid \$25 each, and this provided an incentive for participation and helped in the recruitment process.

### Visual Aids

The student researchers used pictures of the plazas and flip charts to clarify the plazas of interest for the purposes of the research. Focus group participants had a wide range of understanding of what constituted a plaza, and having visual representation of the plazas was important for clarity.

### Demographics of focus groups

Animators recruited focus group participants as well. The sampling was not random, as the ANC team asked a particular combination of animators to recruit for different groups (the groups were female tenants, male tenants, female homeowners and male homeowners). The division of men and women into different focus groups afforded more comfort to both groups. However, a larger and more random sample would have yielded results that could be generalized.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview Scripts**

### **Interviews with Business Owners**

#### Goals:

Inspire interest  
Provide information  
Provide means to follow up

#### Introduction:

NOTE: The animator has already talked with the owner with one of the ANC team, and they will be the lead in re-connecting. The animator will remind the business owner of their earlier visit, and explain that ANC will be organizing a meeting, either in December or early in 2006, to bring interested business owners together to take action on issues and ideas to improve the plazas for businesses and residents alike.

The animator will then explain that the U of T planning students are helping to prepare for this meeting by gathering ideas and information from businesses to help make the agenda as useful as possible.

The students should take a similar approach, clarifying their role as to help ANC, businesses and residents to define what would help the plazas to work better for everyone, and to help ANC to prepare for action on these issues.

#### Discussion/Questions:

##### Warm-up Questions

1. Do you live in this area? If yes, for how long?
2. How long have you operated your business in this location?
3. Do your employees live in this area?

##### Bulk of Interview

4. What are the advantages of this location? The disadvantages?
5. What challenges do you face in your business?
6. What do you think would attract customers to the plaza? What other types of stores/businesses would you like to see in this strip mall that would be good for your business?
7. As a business owner what are the main things you would like to see changed/improved in this neighbourhood? How might these changes help your business?
8. Do you have contact with other business owners in the area? If so, what kind of contact?
9. Would you be interested in coming to a meeting, hosted by ANC, to discuss joint action to improve the plazas?
10. Have you heard about Business Improvement Areas? (If no, give a brief explanation, and say that this is one of the options that will be discussed at the meeting).
11. Do you have any questions for us?

#### Conclusion:

That's all of the questions that we have for now. We would like to thank you for your time today. You can contact us by phone or email, or come over to the ANC office if you have any other questions or suggestions or would like a copy of our final report. We hope to have the report completed by December if you're interested in seeing the results. If the person is interested in attending a meeting, say that ANC will be in touch to organize this.

Thanks again for your assistance.

## Focus Group Script

### Moderator(s):

- Hello everyone, we would like to welcome you and thank you for coming to tonight's focus group session. My name is \_\_\_\_\_, (introduce other members of the team, including ANC staff there as observer or to answer questions). This meeting is part of the Action for Neighbourhood Change Project, a United Way initiative in this area. ANC is working to bring people who live and work in the area together to talk about priorities for changes and improvements, and to take action on those issues.
- The purpose of tonight's discussion, as you know, is about the shopping plazas in this area. We would like to ask a number of questions about how they work or don't work for you and people you know, and how they could be improved.
- Have all participants introduce themselves (first names only). This can begin by going around the table in a clockwise fashion

### Participants:

- Introduce themselves

### Moderator(s):

- As part of our requirements we will now hand out a participant consent form. This form explains to you what tonight's meeting is about and gives you a brief background about any possible risks that may result from this meeting. This form also explains that you are free to answer/not answer any questions or to leave at any time throughout tonight's session. (Although of course if you leave you will not be compensated for your participation). At the bottom of this form we have provided you with a way for you to contact anyone of us should you have any questions about this meeting or would like a copy of our final report
- Please take the next few minutes to fill out these forms and hand them to myself or to any other moderator. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to ask at any time tonight

### Moderator(s):

- Before beginning we would just like to go over tonight agenda and set a few ground rules
- Go over the agenda for the night
  - Length of session
  - Number of questions to be asked
  - When we will finish (has to be exact because people are being paid for their time) (time frame)

- I'd like to suggest some ground rules for the discussion, just to ensure that we all have a chance to speak and that we treat each other with respect. I would suggest: -
  - Treat other with respect;
  - One person talks at a time;
  - Moderator keeps speakers' list;
  - Moderator has right to move discussion on to make sure that there is enough time to cover all the questions, or if there is something said that might be considered offensive to others.
  - Moderator will try to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to answer each question.
- Is everyone in agreement with these ground rules?

Moderator(s):

- Once again we would like to remind you of the area of focus (show map of study area). We would like you to limit your responses to area in question.
- When referring to local shopping plazas we are referring to the following (show a few pictures and refer to a few local examples)
- Does anyone have any questions at this point? If there are no questions, then let's begin

Moderator(s):

Let begin with our first topic: **The Neighbourhood**

- Through their work connecting with people over the last 5 months, ANC is working with a list of priority issues that have been raised by most people in the area. These include: - children and youth; safety; housing; employment; access to health services (review list from forum). Does this sound like the right list? Do you have anything you would add to this?

Participants:

- Each participant should be given a chance to respond to each question (ask each person by name to respond) NOTE: I don't think it should be a formal go-around. I'd suggest asking the question to the group first, let the responses flow, and then get to the people who haven't said anything.

\*\*Note: the second moderator should be writing down all responses on the flip chart and large enough for everyone to be able to view it

Moderator(s):

- Ask any follow up questions and conduct any probing if necessary (draw out answers)

Explore answers in depth e.g. what do you mean by community being unsafe, are there particular areas that you find unsafe

Participants:

- Respond

Moderator(s):

- Before moving on let us review some of the main answers that were just provided. Feel free to add anything further or let us know if we have left anything off of this sheet.

Moderator(s):

Let begin with our second topic: **Shopping Plazas**

This topic will hopefully provide the bulk of our needed information and as such, extra time should be spent on this discussion. We should also provide some good photos of the plazas to clarify the locations we are talking about.

Begin by asking participants to think about the plazas, we will show some photos just to make sure everyone is on the same page. Then, progress to the following questions:

- Do you shop at local plazas?
- If YES, which ones? What stores? How often?
- If not, why not?
- Do you feel comfortable shopping at the plazas? Why/Why not?
- What are the things you like about the plazas in your neighbourhood?
- What are the things you don't like about the plazas?
- Are there plazas (either inside or outside your neighbourhood) that you frequent more often than others? Why?
- Can you buy the things you need and get the services you want at the neighbourhood plazas?
- What would encourage you to spend more time at the plazas?
- Review the comments/ideas of the participants and ask for any additional comments.

Participants:

- Each participant should be given a chance to respond to each question (ask each person by name to respond)

\*\*Note: the second moderator should be writing down all responses on the flip chart and large enough for everyone to be able to view it

Moderator(s):

- Ask any follow up questions and conduct any probing if necessary (draw out answers)

Explore answers in depth e.g. what do you mean by community being unsafe, are there particular areas that you find unsafe

Participants:

- Respond

Moderator(s):

- Before moving on let us review some of the main answers that were just provided. Feel free to add anything further or let us know if we have left anything off of this sheet

Moderator(s):

- Lets now move onto our third topic for the session: **Change in the Plazas**

Here is where we can get some ideas regarding the changes that residents would like to see and then we will create a ranking system. Participants will rate their preferences using a number ranking

- We now want you to once again think about the commercial plazas in your neighbourhood and think about ways in which these areas could be improved.

Moderator is to encourage the free flow of idea (all ideas no matter how crazy should be recorded). To encourage discussion, we can bring up:

- Types of stores-What type of stores would want to make you use the local shopping plazas more? What services do you feel are missing from the local plazas?
- Other services- Are there any services that you feel are missing from these shopping plazas? What types of services would you like to see in these shopping plazas?
- Safety – are there plazas or places in plazas that you do not feel are safe? Please explain (why, time of day, particular activities, past incidents; lighting, traffic etc):
- What are some of the things that you think would help to improve the safety in the plazas?.
- Aesthetic/Design (flowers, trees etc.)-What are some of the things that you would like to see done to the commercial shopping plazas? Is there anything that you think the business owners could do to improve the atmosphere, design of the plazas? Would this encourage you to shop in the plazas more?
- What is the one thing that would encourage you to use the local commercial shopping plaza more?
- Why would this encourage you to use the local shopping plaza?
- Review the comments/ideas of the participants and ask for any additional comments.

Participants:

- Each participant should be given a chance to respond (ask each person by name to respond)

\*\*Note: the second moderator should be writing down all responses on the flip chart and large enough for everyone to be able to view it

Moderator(s):

- Ask any follow up questions and conduct any probing if necessary (draw out answers)

Explore answers in depth e.g. what do you mean by community being unsafe, are there particular areas that you find unsafe

Participants:

- Respond

Moderator(s):

- Before moving on let us review some of the main answers that were just provided. Feel free to add anything further or let us know if we have left anything off of this sheet.

Moderator(s):

- That should conclude the questions for this evening. Does anyone have anything that they would like to add to tonight's session: questions or comments?

Participants:

- Ask any questions or provide any comments

Moderator(s):

- If there are no more questions or comments at this time, we would like to thank everyone for coming and providing us with your valuable insights into the local shopping centres.
- Would you be interested in being part of any organizing that takes place to try and make the kinds of improvements that have been discussed here tonight? Please mark a check mark beside your name on the sign-in sheet before you leave.
- We will be using the information that you have given us tonight, as well as the information collected from other focus groups to develop a series of recommendations for improving the local shopping centres in your neighbourhood.
- It is our hope to have this report finalized by mid-December. Should you be interested in obtaining a copy of this report, please do not hesitate to contact us
- Wish everyone a good night.

- Moderators/group members are to review all notes and charts/info that was used for the night

***After the Session:***

Moderators/group members and ANC staff members are to have a quick discussion to go over the main points raised throughout the evening