

Commercial Displacement in Vaughan's Emerging Downtown

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses issues of commercial gentrification using the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a case study. For the purpose of this research, commercial gentrification will be defined as, “higher value, more competitive business or more profitable residential conversion/redevelopment typical of the post-industrial era” (Ferm 2016, pp. 402). The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is a transit-oriented development (TOD) area currently undergoing massive redevelopment encouraged by planning and smart growth policies in order to support economic growth. TODs have the tendency to raise surrounding land values and rent costs, displacing long-running businesses. A literature review was conducted in order to provide background knowledge and explore the themes of transit-oriented gentrification, commercial gentrification/displacement, and its connections to city branding. This paper also employed the use of a media content analysis and semi-structured interviews, to provide perspective on the commercial changes occurring throughout the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. The research has found the existence of commercial gentrification and displacement pressures in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area. A majority of existing businesses are operating in low-rise and single-use commercial units, which are no longer supported under municipal policy. As a result, many of these commercial spaces are set to be redeveloped into more profitable high-rise and mixed-use commercial towers. This paper concludes with a discussion on the inherent contradiction between how the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is dictated by policy to commercially develop and how the market economy is actually responding.

## **Foreword**

This Major Research Paper has been created to satisfy the final requirements of the Master of Environmental Studies program at York University. There are existing elements of my paper that directly address my Area of Concentration in my Plan of Study, which focuses on the connections between the planning practice and gentrification. Throughout this program, I sought to better understand the ways in which planning influences urban change, including the gentrification process and its socio-economic impacts on a population. This paper contributes to the general understanding of the driving forces of gentrification. It looks at different aspects and driving forces that create the conditions for gentrification and displacement. In this paper, I have included thoughts and ideas that I have gathered from course material and self-directed learning. My major paper fulfills the following three components and specific learning objectives:

### Component 1: Equitable Urban Planning

Learning Objective: 1.a) To understand the ways in which planning procedures can have a negative effect on vulnerable communities, as well as can potentially play a role in improving them.

### Component 2: Gentrification and Displacement

Learning Objective: 2.b) To develop an understanding of the factors that create and/or catalyze the processes of gentrification.

### Component 3: Marginalization and Social Exclusion

Learning Objective: 3.b) To gain knowledge on the connections between urban planning practices and gentrification, and how that affects marginalized communities.

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## **Introduction**

This major research paper aims to gain an understanding of commercial gentrification using the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area as a case study. The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is the City of Vaughan's new transit-oriented downtown. With the expansion of the Line 1 subway system, the surrounding area of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway station has been given the opportunity to increase intensification and densification. As a resident in Vaughan for approximately 20 years, I have seen unprecedented and rapid development in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area. For the majority of the City's history, Vaughan has always been known as a suburban city, adopting the slogan "The City Above Toronto" (York Region, 2008). Traditional development in Vaughan mainly includes low-rise and/or single-use commercial buildings, residential areas of single-detached homes, as well as small industrial and manufacturing businesses. However, the city is now going through extreme redevelopment and rebranding, most apparently affecting commercial-retail and industrial business sectors. The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is continuing to shift away from its traditional suburban form with an assortment of mid-rise buildings, townhomes, and mixed-use towers proposed to construct along main roads and corridors. Businesses like small restaurants and independent shops have begun to either relocate or close down. Commercial strips are sitting on sites proposed to be redeveloped and/or replaced by more profit-yielding projects such as condominium towers. I believe it is of importance to examine how these spaces are impacted as Vaughan continues to create an emerging downtown.



Figure 1: Rendering of the planned downtown. Source: claudecorneir.com



Figure 2: Satellite image of the current downtown. Source: Google Earth

My initial interest in the commercial and economic changes happening in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre stems from my internship at York Region in Summer 2019. In order to fulfill the requirements for my degree in the Master in Environmental Studies program, I completed a 16-week placement as a Planning and Economic Development Assistant/ Employment Surveyor for York Region's annual employment survey. I was tasked with surveying over 2000 businesses throughout the municipality of Vaughan. I had found many businesses were either being replaced or closed down from the following year, specifically in the

Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area. Due to the nature of the position, I had the opportunity to go from business to business, speaking with countless business owners and employees. Several of the business owners that I spoke with had expressed their concerns over the development changes in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and how it affected their businesses. These interactions piqued my interest in city development and raised questions on the possibility of commercial displacement and gentrification. There are currently over 2400 different businesses operating in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, many of which are often small, independent, and/or immigrant-owned. The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is set to be the heart of Vaughan's downtown, and policy mandates commercial retail in this area to be diverse. Still, I questioned what that diversity actually looks like. Therefore, this paper sets out to engage with three key research questions:

- Is the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre undergoing commercial gentrification? If so, in what ways and what are the driving factors?
- How does the policy define diversity? Are the development changes in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, regarding commercial spaces, aligning with the City's vision of diversity?
- Is the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre becoming less commercially diverse?

## **Methodology**

My research paper addresses issues of commercial gentrification in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre using various qualitative approaches, building upon my survey work experience, including a literature review, media content analysis, and semi-structured interviews:

### Literature Review

My literature review drew upon a comprehensive list of scholarly sources, analyzing academic work on transit-oriented development, commercial gentrification, and city branding. I identified the central debates and findings related to my research questions. The information found on commercial gentrification helped in creating interview questions. Most importantly, following my data collection, my review of the literature acted as a lens to analyze my own research and support my findings.

### Media Content Analysis

This paper's research was accomplished in part through a media content analysis of blog posts and podcasts. I specifically looked for information regarding new businesses or commercial developments coming to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Media has a significant impact on public awareness perceptions and behaviour. A media content analysis was conducted in order to gather information on the following topics:

1. To understand the way commercial-retail uses are being developed in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre.
2. To understand the driving forces of why a business owner would want to establish themselves in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre.
3. To understand the way the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is being branded or marketed.



My initial search began with exploring the official Vaughan Metropolitan Centre website (myvmc.ca), which identifies multiple approved development projects coming to the area. I would then conduct Google searches on these projects, along with keywords such as new business, commercial retail, office, coming soon. I would also drive around the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area and look at billboards to find relevant information on what was coming to the area. If I discovered a new business, I would Google search the name of the company and try to find a blog post or an article about it. I intended to identify why the business wanted to locate in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. In addition, during and before my interviews, participants had suggested and sent different sources to find further information on the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. At the suggestion of one of my interview participants, I was introduced to the “Vaughan Rising Podcast” in which I was able to discover additional information on commercial development activities and key significant landowners in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. I chose to specifically focus on this source because it provided insight on how the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is being branded, the key players involved, and how that affects the overall urban landscape of the area.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain a multifaceted perspective on the rapid commercial changes occurring in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, my research employed the use of interviews. My interviews intended to provide a frame of reference from three respective parties: planning professionals involved in policy development, a landowner/developer involved in commercial-retail development in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, and former business owners. I completed four semi-structured interviews with four individuals: two employees at the City of Vaughan, a representative from a major Vaughan Metropolitan Centre landowner and a former business

owner. Participants were asked to speak on commercial gentrification and general commercial development changes in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Each individual was asked about their perception of the driving factors of commercial change and potential impacts on commercial diversity.

### Selection of Participants

Each participant in this study was recruited differently. I was able to contact a City of Vaughan Employee using a contact list publicly available on the official website for the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. For my interview with a representative from a major Vaughan Metropolitan Centre landowner, I used a windshield survey. I drove around the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area looking for “for lease” signs on billboards, commercial buildings and units. The contact information for potential participants was printed on these signs. In order to recruit business owners, I looked at employment survey data available on York Region’s Open Database. The data details a list of businesses in the region from the years 2013-2018, divided by traffic zones. I was able to filter the data for the appropriate traffic zones of businesses that covered the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area. From there, I was able to compare and contrast a list of businesses in operation one year and then closed the next. I gathered a list of former businesses and contacted each one either through the phone number or email listed in the employment survey data. I received one response back from a former restaurant business owner.

### Procedures

Each interview was conducted differently, based on each of the participant’s preferences. Due to the circumstances with the COVID-19 pandemic, all my interviews were conducted through virtual means. On April 24<sup>th</sup>, I conducted a 30-minute interview with two City of Vaughan employees —Michelle Samson, an Economic Development Officer, and Jessica Kwan,

a Senior Planner —through a video call. On May 7<sup>th</sup>, I conducted a 25-minute phone interview with a representative from the development group, QuadReal, one of the biggest landowners in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, I conducted an interview with Linda Sousa. She is the owner of Our Thai, a restaurant that operated in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre on QuadReal-owned land from November 2007 to August 2019. The interview was completed via an exchange of emails. The first two interviews were audio-recorded and later manually transcribed. All interview responses were thematically organized, sorted based on common themes and/or recurring keywords. In the interview section of this paper, participant responses were either paraphrased or directly quoted. Each participant will be identified using the first letter of their first name, with exception to the participant from QuadReal, who would like to remain anonymous. The individual's responses will be identified using the pseudonym "Participant A".

A list of questions was submitted to each participant prior to the interview through email. It allowed the participants the time to think about the questions and gather any thoughts or information. Verbal consent was obtained before the commencement of my interviews for both the two City employees and landowner representative. Written consent was obtained after all four interviews through email. This was mainly due to the personal preference of each participant and their own individual time constraints/schedule.

### Limitations

I encountered several limitations in collecting my data. Initially, I had set out to interview four parties: planning professionals, a representative from a developer or real estate agent, former business owners, and new/currently operating business owners. However, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, I was unable to get into contact with any business owners presently

operating in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. I had originally proposed to go door-to-door as I did when conducting the employment survey for York Region, as I knew that most people would take the time to talk to a student. However, with all the businesses closed down, I tried to contact businesses through the contact information on their websites and was not successful, with the exception of the one restaurant owner. My intent of those particular interviews would have been to gain an understanding of the appeal of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, and why the individual wanted to operate a business in this area. As a solution, I decided to compensate by conducting a media content analysis instead. Through the media content analysis, I examined blogs, articles, and podcasts specifically on future businesses either relocating or establishing themselves in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. My second limitation was in regard to the interviews I did conduct. Originally, I was going to present a detailed map of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre to my participants and have each of them physically mark or draw any details they could remember to capture the physical and apparent development changes occurring in the area. However, due to health and safety concerns, I did not meet my participants face-to-face.

## **Literature Review**

A comprehensive overview of literature was closely examined, focusing on commercial gentrification and its specific connections to transit-oriented development, city branding, and creative placemaking. Each theme identifies key thoughts and arguments, aiding in my primary research analysis. The following information directly reflected the research conducted in this paper and was used to validate key findings.

### Transit-Induced Gentrification

Transit-oriented development (TOD) is an urban planning approach intended to build healthier and sustainable cities, centered around transit stations. The reality of TOD is that it is often linked to gentrification, triggering the process. Gentrification is often packaged and promoted as a positive city revitalization or as exciting redevelopment projects. Transportation plays a critical role in “facilitating city competitiveness and locations with poor quality transport are at a competitive disadvantage” (Knowles & Febarache, 2016, p. 430). Studies have shown that rail transit systems have the tendency to increase the value of surrounding landscapes (Chava et al., 2018, pp. 1). Consumers, tourists, and new residents are attracted to cities with high accessibility. In an article by Knapp, Ding & Hopkins (2001), they found that the mere announcement of plans to construct a new transit station by government administrations (local, regional or provincial) influenced land development. Their study suggested that plans alone could “create market conditions that discourage low-density residential development, encourage high density and transit-oriented development” (Knapp, Ding & Hopkins, 2001, p.32). Land values within a mile of a planned station in cities like Vancouver, Washington, and Miami all rose an average of 10 percent and continued to increase in value over time after the announcement (Knapp, Ding & Hopkins, 2001, p. 37). A study looking at subway stations in

Toronto found that property values increased as proximity and accessibility to a station increased. Within a mile of transit stations, there were differing effects on housing values. The study results also found a significant and positive relationship between exposure to urban rail transit and the likelihood of surrounding residential areas undergoing gentrification in Toronto. Commonly, TOD areas see a dramatic increase in housing and rental costs, as well as a change in social demographics including, household income and education (Grube Cavers & Patterson, 2014). The increases in land value indicate a strong market demand, signalling and attracting developers, potential residents, and businesses. “In order to finance new urban transit projects, cash-strapped entrepreneurial governments are increasingly entering into long term partnerships with the private sector or public-private partnerships (PPPs) in which the public sector pays for services and infrastructure delivered by the private sector” (Farmer, 2011, p. 1155). TODs present a speculative opportunity to these groups because the land value is expected to only increase over time.

Investments in transportation systems are intended to make cities more desirable and favourable to live in. The existence of a new light rail or bus transit centre presents an opportunity to develop high-density infrastructure around transit development, creating a more compact and accessible city. “TOD areas are designed to attract investments that are essentially directed by private-led developments that need to be capitalized through the production of dwellings oriented to upper-income households” (Padiero et al., 2019, p. 736). TOD areas experience a surge in population growth and an increase in population density. It aims to attract new residents and workers, changing the social fabric of the urban landscape. There is a rippling effect in which housing infrastructure, office, and commercial spaces must be produced in order to accommodate the influx of people.

By creating new transit systems, cities have the ability to leverage their wealth and status (Zuk, 2018, p. 40; Burnett, 2013, p. 161; Gonzalez et al., 2019, p. 79). “In many places, public transportation is wielded as an instrument of power, dominance and social control, entrenching the privileges of the affluent and disadvantaged” (Farmer, 2011, p. 1154). A case study on the city of Chicago found that public transportation policy was focused on revamping the downtown core. The researcher, Stephanie Farmer, found that most public transit projects focused on economic growth and bringing capital to the city. She states that the projects focused on attracting business elites, tourists, and other affluent groups rather than the average commuter. For example, the Chicago Transit Authority cancelled the Mid-City Transitway project which would have given working-class immigrant groups better access to the central city. Instead, the project was abandoned for the Circle Line project, which would give transit-rich neighbourhoods even easier access to sports centres, luxury shopping malls, and other tourist destinations (Farmer, 2011, p. 1163).

Along with transit-induced gentrification, comes a significant change in socio-economic class. Displacement is prevalent in TOD neighbourhoods. Existing literature discusses evidence of small businesses and residents of more impoverished neighbourhoods being forcibly removed to facilitate the building of major transit infrastructure. For example, many low-income groups and business owners were displaced from parts of Inner East London in England, during the construction of the Jubilee Line Extension project (Jones & Lucas, 2012, p. 4). Nilson & Delmelle (2018) studied the likelihood a neighbourhood will undergo change after it becomes an established TOD neighbourhood. A multiple case study of nine United States cities with light rail transit stations, found a significant demographic change in transit neighbourhoods compared to non-transit neighbourhoods. For example, in Houston, the class demographics showed an

increase in a younger educated class and a decline in low-income renters from 1980 to 2010 (Nilson & Delmell, 2018, p.178). The researchers found that neighbourhoods transitioning into transit-neighbourhoods experienced an influx of high-income earners, usually young and educated. The study concluded that transit stations are a good indicator of whether or not a neighbourhood will undergo socio-economic change or densification (Nilson & Delmelle (2018, p. 179). TODs make an area more attractive and desirable, signalling a market demand, attracting investment and development. In turn, the land value for the TOD area rises, potentially catalyzing the processes of gentrification and displacement. The implementation of smart growth policies and the development of transit systems can have a significant physical and social impacts on cities, as demonstrated through the following research.

### Commercial Gentrification

Contemporary forms of gentrification are related to the restructuring of city elements such as major redevelopment projects, including retail and service expansion or economic transition. The term commercial gentrification refers to the displacement or replacement of small businesses as an outcome of the changing city. Although research on commercial gentrification is fairly limited, scholarship has documented a rising trend of low-value businesses struggling to remain in cities with increasing land values and rent costs. In a London case study, Ferm (2016, p. 402) found small businesses were being replaced by either “higher value, more competitive business or more profitable residential conversion/ redevelopment typical of the post-industrial era”. A business can be displaced due to massive disinvestment or investment, creating conditions that make it difficult for a business to continue operating in a specific area. For example, Chapple & Loukaitou-Sideris (2019) examined commercial displacement in cities throughout the United States. Their research found that when an area was neglected and not



maintained, the businesses often had to close down or relocate. Similarly, businesses were forced to close or relocate when the built environment was upgraded due to investment, such as new rail transit systems or transit-oriented development. Such investment had tended to raise rent costs on commercial units, making it difficult for businesses to continue operating (Chapple & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2019, p.48).

Commercial gentrification may bring upscaled goods and services, but these new commercial spaces impact the neighbourhood's existing commercial fabric (Gonzalez et al., 2019, p. 79). A study found that lower-value businesses in London were susceptible to displacement pressures encouraged and led by urban policymakers, individual gentrifiers, and landowners. "Business-owners and managers support gentrification when they understand it primarily as an alternative to financial instability and repudiate gentrification when they understand it primarily as a disruptor of aesthetic stability" (Parker, 2018, p. 441). Many businesses are put under gentrification pressure, having to either adapt to the changing commercial landscape or risk potential financial strain.

Commercial gentrification is often viewed as a natural economic progression as the city transitions out of manufacturing or industrial services to more service work. Businesses related to the old economy make way for new ones. Local businesses play an important but often neglected role in city placemaking and shaping daily life (Friedmann, 2013, p. 154). Commercial spaces make cities more accessible by providing affordable goods and services specific to the community's needs and wants. With commercial revitalization, existing residents may not relate to the new changing consumer preferences. Rankin & McLean (2014) looked at commercial spaces in Mount Dennis, a neighbourhood in Toronto with a high immigrant and low-income population poised for change due to the construction of a transit hub serving the Eglinton

Crosstown transit line, a major east-west light rail line. They discussed the negative impact associated with the introduction of upscale businesses, such as a high-end grocery store. Firstly, the products sold in the store were expensive, which negatively impacted the accessibility of goods for the existing immigrant residents. Two, the grocery store only attracted a more affluent population and did not carry culturally- specific goods (Rankin & McLean, 2014, p. 217).

With commercial gentrification, new businesses tend to only cater to a new neighbourhood audience and alienate the more vulnerable or marginalized residents. The literature has found that new and expensive businesses establishing themselves in an area can be taken as drivers or signs of gentrification (Burnett, 2013; Balzarini & Shlay, 2015). These higher-value businesses are a symbol or indicator of affluent consumers, tourists, and/or residents. The attraction of new businesses and residents to a city is an opportunity for economic growth for local government, investors, and possibly business owners. Meltzer & Ghorbani (2017) examined job losses in gentrifying neighbourhoods in East Harlem, New York. They questioned if job employment or the number of jobs would be impacted even if new businesses started to replace and displace older establishments.

The researchers expressed,

“Should neighbourhood economic upgrading bring in new businesses that more productively use the existing commercial space or who exploit farther-reaching hiring networks, local existing residents, with potentially lower skill sets and smaller networks, will not be competitively positioned for these jobs” (Meltzer & Ghorbani, 2017, p. 53).

From their findings, although job employment increased in gentrifying neighbourhoods, these new jobs often went to more affluent and educated residents settling in the area. A change in commercial landscape is expected, as a city attempts to economically upgrade, attracting new

groups to the city. Existing research has demonstrated that commercial gentrification pressures are put on local businesses and business owners as consumers demands change. Traditional business activities, such as manufacturing and industrial work are often vulnerable to economic development. As expressed by Cheshire (2006) focuses on the upgrading of employment, in which lower-value businesses are phased out of an area or are relocated in favour of higher-value businesses. The literature highlights this ongoing upgrading as a “signal of a prospering economy and successful city” (Ferm, 2016, p. 415). The promise of economic growth and development excludes lower-paying jobs and businesses from growth plans and are left alienated from the rest of the developing city. The research indicates that commercial gentrification can bring prosperity and economic success to cities, but more often than not, lower-wage and low-skilled jobs are pushed out due to skyrocketing rents, alienation of marginalized businesses, and a shift to service-focused industries.

### City Branding, Creative Placemaking & Gentrification

From an economic development perspective, city branding is vital in attracting new residents, businesses, and tourists. Harvey Molotch (1976, p.310) theorized cities as urban growth machines stating “... the political and economic essence of virtually any given locality... is growth, the desire for growth provides the key operative motivation toward consensus for members of politically mobilized local elites, however split they might be on other issues”. Molotch emphasizes that the economic health of the city depends on growth and development in order to succeed and compete with other cities. This includes the welcoming of new services and businesses and/or change of commercial establishments. Sprague & Rantisi

(2009) found that new industries are perceived to be more adaptable to shifts in the market. The ongoing upgrading of the city, creates a positive city image

In order to attract investment and newcomers, cities must brand themselves as “unique” or “creative” or “highly diverse”. “Diversity, amenities and aesthetic qualities are distinct but are related facets of locational choice for many gentrifiers” (Tuttle, 2019, p. 3). In a report on urban development projects in Auckland, New Zealand, Tuttle found municipal documents cited diversity as an asset. In this specific case, diversity is referred to as a range of housing forms, commercial retail, and services, and encourages social mixing. In Auckland’s municipal planning documents and policies, diversity was listed as a concept that can be used and marketed in order to attract newcomers to the city districts (Terruhn, 2019, p. 160). Diversity is a central element of a city’s branding, it is used as a selling point for why people and businesses would want to move in and settle in an area.

Creating an image of the city is a marketing tactic meant to attract businesses and residents that meet the city’s overall vision. City branding sells the future image of an area that differs from the current reality. “City images have become ever more important for localities seeking to package themselves as friendly, enjoyable and cohesive communities woven together by locally enmeshed cultural and emotional ties” (McCallum et al., 2005, p. 25). The idea of “creativity” has been included in recent urban policy and is used as a tool in order to attract new residents, businesses, and investors. This is relevant to the case of Liberty Village in Toronto, in which the neighbourhood had to brand itself as a creative hub within Downtown Toronto. Liberty Village was branded as providing a different and diverse experience isolated from the rest of the downtown area. Gentrifiers, mainly young professionals, were attracted to the industrial architecture; however disliked working next operating factories due to the noise. The

researchers found that, “while attracted to the aesthetics of industrial architecture, there is a perception that new creative businesses ultimately do not value economic diversity in the area” (Catungal et al., 2008, p. 1110). The branding of Liberty Village was proven successful, attracting artists and creative offices to the neighbourhood. However, it negatively impacted the traditional manufacturing and industrial area resulting in the displacement of long-term businesses and operating factories. In this particular case, the processes of gentrification and commercial displacement was attributed to creativity-led urban regeneration and rebranding.

Similarly, in a case study focusing on Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, images of poverty were commodified in order to attract new residents and consumers to the area. “Spaces of consumption are strategically important to driving urban regeneration and the production of capital” (Burnett, 2013, p. 161). New commercial developments would brand themselves using the neighbourhood’s history, the culture, and the “grittiness” of the Downtown Eastside. In this particular study, new commercial developments and other upscaled changes to the neighbourhood pushed out long-term tenants and existing groups from revamped areas (Burnett, 2013, p. 165). Keatinge and Martin examined neighbourhood branding and commercial revitalization in a commercial street in Etobicoke. They found that gentrifiers played a key role in commercial gentrification. “Gentrifiers may be the drivers of neighbourhood branding by defining particular identities, activities and consumption practices as aligning with the brand” (Keatinge & Martin, 2016, p. 868). The market economy is dictated by consumer preference; therefore, it is expected that commercial spaces will change accordingly in order to cater to consumer demands.

## The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a Case Study

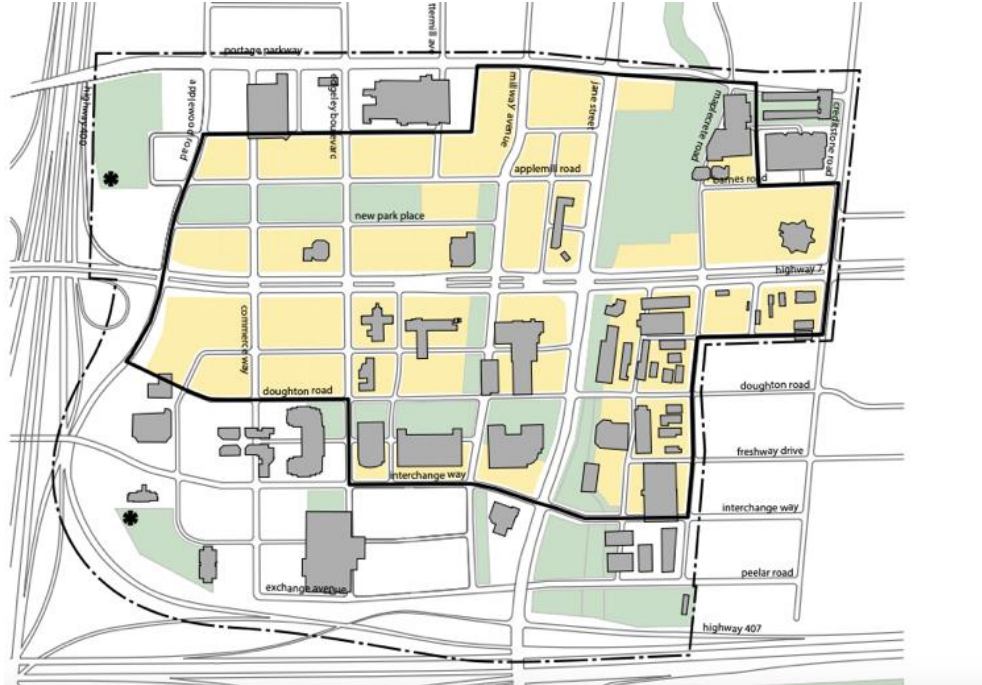


Figure 3: Rendering of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre boundaries. Source: Secondary Plan: Vaughan Metropolitan Centre 2010

The City of Vaughan, located in the Greater Toronto Area is one of the fastest-growing communities in Ontario (Vaughan, 2019). As of the latest 2016 population census, Vaughan's population is just over 300,000 (Statistics Canada, 2016). Identified as an urban growth centre in *Places to Grow: A Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe*, the city is expected to grow to more than 400,000 people by 2031 (Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure, 2006). According to the provincial plan, the City of Vaughan is required to increase its density by 900 percent, in order to meet its 2031 people and jobs targets (Growth Plan, Section 2.2.4.4.). The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is expected to accommodate most of this growth. As the new core downtown area, located at the intersection of Highways 400, 407 and 7, the 442-acre area will be home to over 1.5 million square feet of office space, almost 1 million square feet of retail space

and over 12, 000 residents (City of Vaughan, 2019). There is immense development pressure put on the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre to support intensification.

The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is expected to be Vaughan’s financial district. High-intensity infrastructure is to be developed in order to accommodate a wide range of uses including commercial, office, retail, and residential uses (City of Vaughan, 2019). A key planning objective in Vaughan’s Official Plan (2019) is to change the industrial and commercial development pattern that has existed in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre for the past 30 to 40 years (p. 23). There is an abundance of low-density commercial strips home to low-density manufacturing companies and other industrial-type activities. There are multiple single-storey commercial buildings filled with a mixture of mom-and-pop shops, such as shops, ethnic restaurants, and contracting services. The City of Vaughan has “one of the country’s strongest industrial powerhouses”, specifically concentrated in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre (City of Vaughan, 2018). There is a strong industrial economic base consisting of manufacturing, warehousing, and a variety of shipping jobs (City of Vaughan, 2020). As stated in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Secondary Plan, the area will be diverse. The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is expected to be an area that accommodates a range of jobs, housing, and building forms such as housing units and offices. Objective 3.3, in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Secondary Plan, aims to attract and accommodate a variety of employment uses. In order to become a central business district, policy supports the development of more corporate and government offices (City of Vaughan, 2010, p.20).

It is anticipated to attract significant office employment and corporate headquarter developments (City of Vaughan, 2010, p. 147). A significant employment land transformation is planned around the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Subway station and to existing commercial

retail properties. According to Policy 8.2.3., office spaces will occupy 15 percent of land near the subway station and a minimum of 15 percent on all development blocks (City of Vaughan, 2010, p.60). Currently, most commercial buildings in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre are low-rise or single-storey structures and commercial strips. Policy states that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre must have the highest concentration of density in the city, therefore these commercial buildings are now considered non-standard use. The only low-rise buildings to be developed in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre will be for residential purposes such as townhouses and apartments. The City is looking to redevelop most, if not all commercial spaces to be mixed-use buildings, in which 70% of commercial retail and services will be on the ground floor (City of Vaughan, 2010, p. 62). New urban design guidelines encourage future commercial retail and other small business usages only in mid-to-high-rise buildings.



Figure 4: Vaughan Metropolitan Centre satellite image from 2016. Source: zoomearth.com





Figure 5: Vaughan Metropolitan Centre satellite image from 2020. Source: Google Maps

## **Media Content Analysis Findings**

A media content analysis was conducted in order to understand the appeal of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre from a business owner's perspective. The intent was to understand why a business owner would want to relocate or establish their business in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. The City of Vaughan's Vaughan Rising Podcast focuses on development projects active within the City of Vaughan. The host, Michelle Samson, City of Vaughan's Economic Development Officer, conducted ten full in-depth interviews with key investors and developers as well as City representatives. After listening through each of the episodes, I have gathered key information regarding the appeal of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, its driving factors of change, and its future plans for commercial spaces. From the podcasts, I found three following predominant story elements and themes:

### The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a Transformational Space

The podcast promotes the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a new chapter for the City of Vaughan. The podcast itself was created with the intention to promote Vaughan "as a magnet for investment and economic opportunity" (City of Vaughan, 2019). This is achieved effectively through marketing and rebranding. Throughout the series, there is a major emphasis on Vaughan being an area that has graduated from its suburban status. The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is highlighted as proof of Vaughan's transformation into a full-fledged city. In his 20-minute podcast episode, Mario Cortelluci (2019), the CEO Cortel Group describes the previous Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area as "very industrial, very empty". He discusses how low-rise commercial retail and industrial properties will be transformed into a commercial centre for Vaughan. His episode paints the idea of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as being incredibly rural but having the potential to become a competitive city.

The Cortel Group is one of the more prominent developers in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, responsible for creating and transforming their land into commercial and residential communities. Cortelluci (2019) recalls his experience developing in Vaughan Metropolitan Centre in the early 2000s before the area was declared an urban growth centre. He revealed that his colleagues/ competitors described the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area as a space with little to no opportunity for growth. It is interesting to point out the similar parallels between the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and “un-gentrifiable cities” in the existing literature on gentrification. Case studies on cities like Vancouver or Frankfurt were once described as “unattractive for profit-seeking capital” until government intervention (Mosgen, 2019, p. 419). Through massive investment and state-led interventions, these cities were able to physically and economically upgrade. Similarly, through provincial, regional and municipal policy, the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is attracting interest from developers, residents, and consumers to the area. As the demand for new infrastructure is increasing to support this growth, the urban landscape is continuing to change. Cortelluci ends the podcast, triumphantly stating that he saw the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre’s potential and is now reaping the rewards of investing in a suburban area.

This “empty and rural” narrative is repeated in a discussion with Gary and Craig William, Senior Vice Presidents at CRBE. The Williams (2019) stated that, “Vaughan has graduated to a new class. It has hit that critical mass, and as a result it has created a gravity to be able to attract companies large and small, international and local”. This statement speaks to the active role state agencies play in upgrading the City of Vaughan socially and economically. Specifically, the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is depicted as an empty canvas, in which existing low-rise commercial properties will be removed in order to build higher-density high-rise

condominiums or mixed-use buildings. In this episode, the Williams revealed that CRBE are looking to build office infrastructure to attract middle-and-upper-class workers. Policy tools and active development plays take certain measures in order to elevate the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre but at the expense of the existing commercial infrastructure here and small businesses that are susceptible to gentrification pressures.

### The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a Transit Oriented Development Area

In every podcast episode, each guest speaker agreed that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre's main appeal is its proximity to transit infrastructure. It is apparent that transit and the location are drawing people, businesses, and investors to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Dennis Cutajar (2019), Vaughan's Director of Economic and Cultural Development, listed, "The location, the transportation infrastructure, the fantastic rail system, the VIVA system, the subway that just opened up, and the 400 series highway that exist here. Location is very important". Cutajar stated that businesses are looking to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre because the City is actively working to draw in talent to the area. He explains how the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre currently consists of two major industries: manufacturing and construction. However, the City is looking to grow their business services, creativity-led businesses, and financial sector instead. In another episode, the host asks Gary Williamson on the types of tenants who should be looking at settling in Vaughan. In which Williamson (2019) answered, "I would say anybody large and small, but we are seeing a lot of tech engineers, a lot of business services". From the information gathered, it seems as though the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is going through urban regeneration and economic restructuring. Key development players and the City are actively looking to expand more professional sectors, straying away attracting industrial and manufacturing industries.

The podcast episodes proclaim that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway station's construction spurred development change in the area. In regard to land prices and values, Craig Williamson (2019) reports that rents have increased since 2018 by 18 percent, and it is expected to increase in the years following. A large appeal of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is the increased accessibility in and out of the City. William states that 10-15 years ago it would have been difficult to access the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, "there's now a lot of factors as to why people want to be up here and get here... with better transit systems, we can get them up here". In order to support population growth, the City, along with major developers and investors, are working to produce transit-oriented developments. These new developments add to the attractiveness of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and are aimed at attracting new capital to the area.

#### The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a Creative Space

The podcast frames the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a developing creative space. The guest speakers emphasize throughout the episodes that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre will provide a "creative" and "unique" experience for future residents and workers. This is prominent in the episode with Mike Reel, QuadReal's Vice President of Development. The episode focuses on the master plan for Revel Park, QuadReal's latest development project consisting of the entire Vaughan Metropolitan Centre South Community District. Revel Park is a 34-hectare parcel of land in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, set to be an area of diverse communities and commercial retail (City of Vaughan, 2019). According to Reel (2019), QuadReal's vision for Revel Park is to develop a creative space with soulfulness. In regards to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, Reel (2019) said, " Why would you visit a place? Because of its uniqueness. It would be interesting, it would bring something to Vaughan that is not in the GTA

yet”. The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, or at least Revel Park is being marketed as a place for creativity, a space that differs from any other space.

It is evident through Reel’s statements that “creativity” is used in order to attract capital. Revel Park is a project aimed at changing the current character of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Currently, Revel Park has low-rise small and independent retail, but it will be going through massive redevelopment after existing leases expire. In regard to what the public should expect, Reel states that there will be new commercial and retail infrastructure. Reel (2019) explained that the new businesses are “not going to be the type of retail you see everywhere else... If we can create uniqueness for the occupant, and for visitors and business, then we’ve created a magnet which will then continue to draw people into the emerging downtown in the future”. Commercial retail in this part of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is going to be hand-selected by QuadReal, and businesses will have to align with QuadReal’s vision of creativity. Existing commercial spaces in the South Community District of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre are being phased out in order to reflect a fundamental shift in QuadReal’s vision for the land.



Figure 6: Highlighted area depicts the South Community district in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Source: myvmc.ca

## Interview Findings

I began each interview by explaining my involvement with the annual York Region Employment Survey back in Summer 2019. I recalled my conversations with various business owners who expressed fear and uncertainty in if their businesses would still be operating the following year. I also spoke about my experiences and how I saw many businesses in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, either closing or relocating. I then expressed my concerns on commercial gentrification and directly questioned if each party has seen these kinds of commercial changes occurring in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. In my interviews with Michelle Samson and Jessica Kwan from the City of Vaughan, the responses I received were either inconsistent and/or contradictory. This is most apparent when both participants denied the existence of commercial gentrification or displacement pressures. However, moments later, they both acknowledged the displacement of existing small independent businesses.

M:

*I guess, it's a bit of a tricky subject, when I typically think of gentrification I think of more established retail communities like Kensington Market or Queen Street West. There are not as much retail players, a lot of empty space and what is there for commercial are industrial players and spaces, a little bit of chains. It's a very different kind of context for sure. I'm sure Jessica would agree, we don't necessarily want to comment too much on the philosophy, **the landowners have their own prerogative to make decisions, and the city has created a framework for this area to transform.** And I don't want to get too deep or have us comment on anything too political.*

J:

*I agree on that, but maybe I can chime in from a policy perspective or even a historical perspective. Vaughan Metropolitan Centre now is our emerging downtown fueled by all the transit investments that we've seen in the past couple of years...As you can see the existing and previous state of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is very suburban, lots of industrial usage aren't necessarily the most attractive... With the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, we want to see a mix of uses, we want to see complete communities. So all the commercial uses from retail to entertainment to offices. **We want to see a big broad mix of uses but in a very compact, an urban form...** The Secondary Plan envisions the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is that it is a compact urban form with high intensification to support the transit investments in the area.*

*From a Secondary Plan perspective, **I don't know if it speaks to gentrification, but we do have some neat commercial entities [e.g., Bar Buca, Pumpernickels, Balzak's Coffee Roaster.] coming into the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre .... We want to create an identity, a sense of place for people to want to come to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Hamilton has its own charms, Toronto has its own charms...***

From their perspective, they see commercial gentrification as a process that occurs in more urban spaces in GTA neighbourhoods or Downtown Toronto. For both participants, commercial gentrification is not a suburban problem. Although land in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is fairly underdeveloped in comparison, there are existing commercial properties with long-term operating small businesses. For this paper's purpose, commercial gentrification is defined by low-value businesses being replaced by high value-businesses and/or more profitable residential conversion and redevelopment (Ferm, 2016, p. 402). In the case of the Vaughan Metropolitan



Centre, many existing low-value businesses and commercial retail properties are sitting on land proposed to be redeveloped for condominiums or mixed-use infrastructures. For example, Kwan mentions that high-value businesses like acclaimed Italian restaurant and café, Bar Buca., are coming into the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre to elevate the experience of the land and attract people to the area. Although many new development projects in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre are built on vacant land and while there are no businesses being displaced in the proposed sites, there are also new development projects proposed to take place in spaces with small businesses that will be displaced. For example, in my interview with a representative from QuadReal, Participant A states that existing commercial plazas on their land will be completely redeveloped for their new development project, Revel Park.

A:

*So the Interchange/ Highway7 intersection is going to be Downtown Vaughan. **All those (commercial) buildings that you see there now are no longer a part of the master plan.***

*Those uses are non-standard uses now, they are no longer part of the Master Plan...*

It was also apparent from my interviews with Samson, Kwan and the QuadReal representative that policy is a key driver in development patterns. Samson and Kwan repeatedly stated that what currently exists in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is not in line with the overall vision established in the Secondary Plan. For example, in regard to small mom & pop shops, Kwan stated that they are being displaced because they are no longer in congruence with the vision for the downtown. Many of the commercial buildings in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre are low-rise and low-density, which are not in keeping with the Secondary Plan's high density, high-rise policies (City of Vaughan, 2010). It is contradictory when Kwan expresses that these smaller

businesses culturally add to the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre but at the same time, there is no policy support to keep these businesses operating in the area.

*J:*

*... not to say that we don't want to support mom & pop restaurants because there are tons of them and they are amazing. But the displacement factor is that a lot of the buildings right now are all low-density developments buildings and that's not what we want to see in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. We want to see a mixture of high-medium-low density developments but would also require commercial uses that would support the entire community*



Figure 6: Example of an abandoned existing commercial strip in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Source: (Huang, Jessie 2020).



Figure 7: Proposal sign to convert commercial strip shown in Figure 6 into two high-rise mixed-use towers. Source: (Huang, Jessie 2020).

This is reaffirmed in my QuadReal interview, in which the individual stated that the company is just waiting for the leases of existing businesses on their Revel Park site to expire. Revel Park is set to have 18 condominiums, over 300,000 sq.ft of commercial space, 5 acres of park space and more (Menkes, 2020). The individual made it very clear that all their existing commercial buildings are no longer a part of QuadReal’s Master Plan as well as the Secondary Plan. When I asked the individual to give examples of businesses that were either coming to or leaving the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, I was met with a patronizing response.

A:

*Your question is “What businesses are leaving and coming?” No, this is more than just businesses leaving and coming. This is a major intensification of that site. Even if a retailer closed in my site today and a new one wanted to open, they can’t because I can*

*no longer do single use retailers on that site... When you ask your question on what businesses are coming and going, you need to understand that this is not about “Oh this business is going to close and another one is going to open because of the subway there”. No, this is about “This business is going to close, they are going to dig a hole and put underground parking and build a 20-story tower on top of it”. So that is how major things are going to be.*

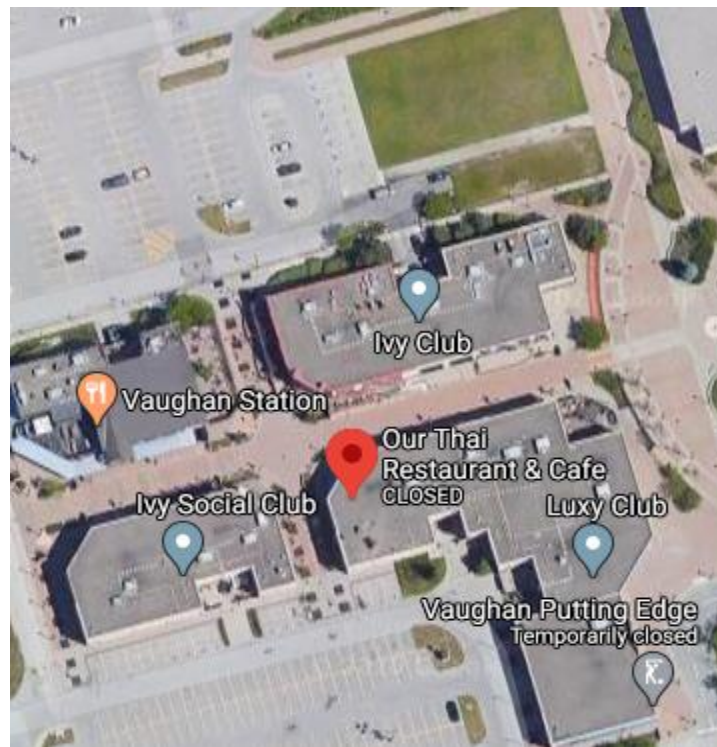


Figure 8: Satellite image of the Revel Park site. Source: Google Maps



Figure 9 & 10: Examples of existing commercial infrastructure on the Revel Park site. Source: (Huang, Jessie 2020)

I then asked Participant A what kind of retail Revel Park is expected to have. Participant A said:

A:

*It is mostly going to be the **type of retail that caters to the residents...** It is very **lifestyle oriented**. If you are a resident in those condo towers, you are going to go to the little grocery store, you're going to get changed, come back downstairs, go to Soul Cycle, spin class, yoga class, you may go to your dentist. On the weekends, you are going to go out with your friends, because your condo is so small, you're going to go to the park with your coffee, in the park we are building. So those are the types of uses it's going to be.*



Figure 11: Site rendering for Revel Park. Source: menkes.com



Figure 12: Site rendering of commercial buildings in Revel Park. Source: menkes.com

Participant A speaks on a complete transformation of a space, in which any existing business on the Revel Park site will be removed and replaced by higher-value commercial goods and services. The individual's response is an example of the inherent contradiction between what policy dictates and how the market is responding. Samson and Kwan have stated that the City wants to see a variety of employment uses and commercial businesses throughout the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre but policy cannot control changes in consumption patterns. With new residents coming into the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre it is expected that consumer tastes in the area will change as well. Like Participant A said, it is essentially whatever the market wants, existing businesses can either supply and meet demands or not.

I asked the same question about businesses coming and going in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre to Linda Sousa, who owned Our Thai, a small restaurant that operated in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre from 2007-2019. Our Thai was operating in the South Community District, where Revel Park is currently being developed. Sousa listed a mixture of small businesses and larger chains that operated in the same commercial plaza as hers throughout the years of her operating restaurant. Additionally, Sousa described the area as lively on the weekends with heavy foot traffic before multiple development projects in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Interestingly enough, in my interview with Jessica Kwan, she speaks of a complete transformation of commercial spaces in the exact area of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Our Thai used to be.

J:

*In the Southwest Quadrant, the old Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, those (businesses) are all going to be gone. There are pre-proposals that are submitted to move those uses and provide a higher density in terms of a tall building with retail at bottom, very similar*

*to what we see in Downtown Toronto. There are other strip retail plazas in the area, as well, those are either being bought out or proposed to be combined with other lands, or a landowner owns it and wants to be redeveloped. Because what is there right now is not keeping in with the vision with our emerging downtown. In the North East quadrant, the banquet centre (Riviera), we know the owners of it (Cortel) are eventually going to destroy that and create a mixed used development there. That is not to say that we are displacing employment jobs, we want to see high-intensity office uses, Class A office uses in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Whether it is banks, or other offices, like a KPMG, a PWC, we want to see those types of places in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre.*



Figure 13: Our Thai no longer in operation. Source: (Huang, Jessie 2020)

Kwan's response is inconsistent with her initial statement at the beginning of our interview, denying the existence of commercial gentrification. Her statement confirms many existing commercial spaces are being completely redeveloped and revitalized. These spaces and



business units are being transformed into more profitable development projects. Kwan's response also speaks to the economic restructuring of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area. As she stated previously, the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre currently has a lot of existing industrial uses, and there is more of an emphasis from the City to attract more professional type office jobs. As Kwan mentioned, lower value businesses such as the Riviera are going to be redeveloped in order to make way for financial industries or other high-value businesses that need offices.



Figure 14: (left) Streetscape photo of the Riviera Centre. Source: (Huang, Jessie 2020)



Figure 15: (right)The approved redevelopment project CG tower by the Cortel Group. Source: cgtower.ca

In the statement below regarding commercial diversity, Kwan states the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is expected to provide a whole range of commercial uses and jobs. However, it seems as though only specific job sectors are being supported and protected in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre.

J:

*The Secondary Plan actually defines what diversity is. It means accommodating a variety of housing forms, architecture, a range of jobs, housing, provided for all levels, which means affordable housing, open spaces offer a range of amenities and experience. So we have been doing all this stuff. So housing forms are either high, mid and low rise, we have all of those... **Range of jobs, so we have the office uses, the retail, restaurant sectors, we have a whole range of commercial uses that will be providing jobs in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, which is one of our visions as well... The question is, is it becoming more diverse? Absolutely, it's being transformed from a very suburban model to a more urban compact area and community. You won't see it now but in a few years you will see that the skyline is absolutely changed. You will see and feel a change.***



Figure 16: Streetscape photo of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre skyline. Source: (Huang, Jessie 2020)

Concerning the driving factors of commercial change in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, each participant had a similar response. The participants said:

J:

*I would say that **the main driver is the Secondary Plan**. The Secondary Plan is the bible of how to direct growth within the **Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and the partnership between the City and the developers**. There are two major developers within the **Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, SmartCentres and QuadReal**, who combined own half the land of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. They actually have master plans of how they envision the area to grow and we work with them on those. And obviously we don't always see eye-to-eye on everything but in planning everything is a compromise or we try to do everything that is best for our downtown...From a policy perspective, when the Secondary Plan was created about 8-9 years ago, there were some appeals... So there has been a lot of work and dialogue and settlements between both the OMB, the City and the applicants. So a lot of work has been put in on all ends, so **I would say it really is a partnership in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre**.*

M:

*In our marketing, the mayor's speeches, we've talked a lot about how the project is very collaborative. **We've talked about how the (partnerships between) the city, the major landowners, transit agencies**, so I think that has been a very important differentiator maybe relative to other communities in terms of building intensification...There seems to be a good dialogue...*

A:

*The subway is driving those changes because the city needs to grow. That area is right on top of the subway line and it's easier for people who live in that area to get to Downtown (Toronto because they no longer have to drive. So it is primarily transit driven. It is policy driven... In the master plan, they would have had it 10 years ago of what they are going to do with the plan... **In terms of what's driving it, it's not one thing that is driving it but I would say a majority of it is policy, land use intensification, highest and best use and transit.***

In the case of Our Thai, the construction of rail and bus infrastructure disrupted their business.

This played a critical role in their decision to close down. The participant revealed:

L:

*The construction of the subway and bus system had negatively affected our business as it made it very difficult for our patrons to come into and out of the plaza. With only 2 ways to get in and out of the plaza (Hwy7 and Jane), which was consistently congested throughout the day, our lunch customers simply did not have the time to dine as well as wait in traffic for their allotted time. **By the time the subway finally started we did not see any difference in business. The bus route was not completed so the construction was still negatively affecting business.** The condos did bring in new patrons but that increase did not match the decrease we saw due to all the construction for the subway and bus route.*



Figure 17: The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway station. Source: Toronto.com

It is clear that new transit infrastructure like the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway station and bus transit improvements has had a significant effect on how the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is currently developing. From Participant A, the City is developing the way it is in order to accommodate growth. People are attracted to the ease of accessibility and location of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and a growing demand for residential buildings, commercial retail, and offices. From Sousa's response, the construction of transit-oriented developments negatively impacted her business, during and after the completion of these projects. She describes how the restaurant attracted some new residents from nearby condominiums but not many. This could be an indication of changing consumer tastes in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. I was able to ask Participant A about issues of affordability for current business owners operating on the Revel Park site. I also questioned the affordability of renting a commercial unit and the prices of goods and services. My intent was to understand if businesses being displaced on QuadReal lands were feeling pressure from rising land prices and rent prices. The response I received was inconclusive:

A:

*Affordability depends on demand. The reason why it would be cheaper is because land is cheaper compared to Toronto and there is more land in Vaughan to build more. My guess is taxes are cheaper in Vaughan as well. **So if tax is cheaper and land is cheaper, presumably retailers will have better pricing. I would think so if costs are less, retailers would be able to pass the costs along.***

I found it interesting how Participant A compared land value in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre to land value in Toronto. I thought it was a poor example given by the individual because in comparison to Toronto most cities would be considered affordable. Through our interactions, it was clear that the individual did not want to speak on issues of affordability. Participant A chose not to speak on the rent pricing for their new commercial and residential units. The individual did not want to reveal the costs of what it would take to live or work in Revel Park.

## **Limitations of the Study/Future Research**

This paper solely focuses on the development of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. The findings and conclusions from my study may not be applicable to other neighbourhoods and municipalities. For future research on commercial gentrification, it would be beneficial to examine other growing suburban cities and test the generalizability of my findings. Due to unprecedented circumstances, I was unable to conduct as many interviews as I had originally proposed. My interview findings are based on a small sample size, which may not reflect overall developing trends in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. If given the opportunity to replicate my study, I would hope to conduct interviews with a larger sample size such as potential investors, small to large-sized businesses from various industries in Vaughan, in order to produce a more representative result. Given that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is still in its beginning stages of becoming an established downtown core, my research only paints an accurate representation of what commercial gentrification looks like in the area currently. The area is still expected to grow for another 10 to 20 years. Once the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre has completed its expansion and development, it would be interesting to review the commercial changes and examine commercial diversity over a longer time period. Additionally, we can see how far the demographic density has changed in this area and how it would affect consumption patterns and its influence on different business activities.

## **Conclusion**

My paper explores the concept of commercial gentrification using the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre as a case study. There is evidence to conclude that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is undergoing significant commercial gentrification and displacement pressures. First, as an urban growth centre and the only area outside of Toronto with subway access, the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre area has been given an opportunity to implement smart growth policies geared towards creating a transit-oriented city. Traditional development in Vaughan consists of low-rise and low-density buildings, but with the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway station, different building typologies and density solutions can be explored. What I have found are rapid development changes that have directly affected existing businesses in the area. When reviewing the literature on commercial gentrification, researchers found lower-value businesses are often replaced by either higher-value businesses or more profitable development. This is also the case for the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre where a majority of existing businesses are sitting on sites proposed to be redeveloped for more profit-yielding projects such as condominiums, higher density offices, and mixed-use towers. Largely spurred on by municipal policy and private actors, many existing businesses are to be displaced in order to intensify and create a more compact downtown. It is also important to note that massive transit investment has significantly impacted the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre's land values. Thus, making it more expensive for existing businesses to continue operating. Although transit development alone does not create gentrification conditions in this case study, it is a catalyst.

The findings in this paper also demonstrate an inherent contradiction between what policy wants in terms of diversity for the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre and what is actually being developed. Diversity outlined in the Secondary Plan means accommodating a range of jobs



and building typologies, creating employment opportunities for people of all socio-economic backgrounds (City of Vaughan, 2010). By this definition alone, I have concluded that the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is becoming less commercially diverse. My research suggests that there is an avid push from city staff, including city officials and major landowners, to create opportunities for higher-skilled and higher-wage labour. As the area intensifies, it attracts more clerical jobs such as financial institutions, technological headquarters, and large office corporations. Although the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Secondary Plan and its policies may want to create commercially diverse spaces, heavy reliance on the private sector is needed to achieve these objectives.

The Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is envisioned as a high-rise financial district, which is a direct contrast from its most dominant business sectors: industrial work and manufacturing. My interview findings revealed that existing industrial and manufacturing spaces no longer fit in with the overall vision for the area. The same can be said for most businesses operating in low-rise and/or single-use buildings and commercial strips. While reviewing the literature, I learned that cities often want to brand themselves as being “diverse” in order to attract future residents and businesses. However, development in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is geared towards redeveloping a majority of its employment lands, ultimately displacing a number of different businesses with a diverse range of goods and services, from manufacturing to accounting to consulting services. Instead, my research reveals an emphasis on attracting more creative industries, such as technology companies and office work. Research has demonstrated that with commercial revitalization and redevelopment, existing businesses are pressured to cater to new audiences. As the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre continues to gentrify, creating more expensive housing solutions, employment areas, and attracting more affluent groups, it is expected that

consumer demands will change. This is exemplified in my interviews, in which a small business was unable to attract customers despite an influx of residents from newly built condominiums. The findings in this paper suggest that existing businesses face a dilemma of adapting to changing consumer preferences or succumbing to gentrification pressures.

From assessing literature on commercial gentrification, a majority of scholars agree that while local businesses heavily contribute to the character of an area, they are often not valued. Local businesses are often not acknowledged for their key role in providing goods and services that specifically cater to local residents and consumers. In addition, small businesses are frequently tied to the history of the community. In my study, I have found most of this to be true. It is quite apparent in my media content analysis and interview responses how indifferent or disinterested developers and city staff are towards protecting existing businesses. In fact, municipal policy helps to drive the commercial gentrification process resulting in commercial spaces being redeveloped faster. Most businesses in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre are currently operating in what is considered to be non-standard use buildings. My research has found the urban design guidelines, as well as, the objectives outlined in the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre Secondary Plan finds most commercial-retail strips and industrial buildings to be incompatible with the overall vision for the area. The displacement or closure of local businesses has been one of the many causalities of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre's attempt to further economic growth. In the case of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre, it is not that small businesses do not serve a purpose; they are just severely undervalued in comparison to their proposed counterparts. The vision for the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre consists of large mixed-use towers, office buildings, and condominium towers. Rebranding itself as a full-fledged city, the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre is transitioning away from its suburban heritage. The product

of my research confirms that plans for the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre focus on reaching substantial economic growth at the expense of smaller businesses and vulnerable industries.

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