

LEESIDE PROJECT

Summer 2003

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Final Report

September 12th, 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report has been written to introduce the “Leeside Project” and give a brief summary. It is based on the findings of a community research project that began May 26th and has continued until September 12th, 2003.

The report begins with an explanation of how the project came about and which community groups initiated the project. Following this are some details about “Leeside”- where it is, who uses it, and how it is used. The next section gives a detailed account of the important meetings and events that took place during the research and consultation process. Following this is an overview of the results of a survey which was used by the project to learn more about Leeside and to better understand the resident’s perceptions. Finally, the report concludes with a brief editorial about the project by the author of the report, and recommendations for the future of the project.

A website was also set up that was important to the promotion of the project over the summer, as it was used to direct people to information about what was happening. Both the Interim Report and the Final Report are posted on the site so that interested persons can download, print, and read the report (www.leeside.ca).

Sections of the report are as follows:

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INTRODUCTION



The above photograph was taken in front of Leeside, circa 2000. It displays a message to all those who visit. If we pay close enough attention, we can read the graffiti: “WELCOME 2 LEE SIDE”-- as if to say that this is a place that is worth coming to, and young people enjoy it here. “Welcome to Leeside -- this is our place, we like it here.”



Four years later, the wall is blank; no welcome message for visitors, no signs, and not much to indicate that there is anything particularly attractive or exciting about Leeside at all. It has begun to feel more and more like a “space,” and less like a “place” - with almost nobody taking ownership, Leeside faces an uncertain future.

In January, 2003, the Hastings Community Centre and the Kiwassa Neighbourhood House, the Hastings Community Policing Centre, and the Hastings-Tillicum Community School decided to apply to the Office of the Solicitor General for

the Safer Streets Grant Program. They discussed two potential projects to apply for, and decided to go with Leaside. Since then, the City of Vancouver has come on board with the project, and representatives from all groups have been attending monthly meetings to act as an advisory committee to oversee the Leaside Project. The purpose of the project has been to gather information from residents, users, and stakeholders in the Hastings-Sunrise Community who are concerned about Leaside, and find out what all groups would like to see Leaside become. The project chose to hire a young person who would have an understanding of the issues that are relevant to the young people using Leaside.

WHAT IS LEESIDE?

“Leaside” or “Lee Side” is a tunnel that connects the Empire Bowl area of Hastings Park to the end of East Pender Street, behind the E-Comm. building. It is similar in design to the Cassiar Connector, but only one lane wide and 50 metres long. Originally, the space was going to be used by Transit to connect to a bus loop; however, the idea was abandoned. For this reason, the ownership of Leaside has been a point of confusion over the years, many thought that Parks Board was in charge of the tunnel, but in fact, the structure is located on a street, and the Moth has ownership of the tunnel structure. It was fenced off soon after it was built.

Years later, the tunnel had become a place for drug use, prostitution, and a shelter for homeless to sleep. About 5 years ago, youth started going to the area to skateboard and paint graffiti murals. One of the first young people to start using the space was a skateboarding graffiti artist named “Lee.” Because Lee and his friends used it so much, and because there was a large mural with Lee's name there, the space became to be known as “Leaside.”

More recently, Leaside has become an important space for BMX riders and Mountain Bikers. Much of Leaside's acclaim is due to the fact that it remains perfectly dry all year round, and for the last 2 years there have been lights at Leaside so that it can be used at night. A few BMX riders have been involved in this project as it has evolved; one of the main concerns of this group has been their need of a place to ride during the long winter months as there are very few places for BMX riders or mountain bikers when it is raining. Leaside is a perfect spot, and they have utilized it well, as have skateboarders in the past. Several wooden ramps have been built and maintained by the skateboarders, BMX riders and mountain bikers over the past 5 years.

This winter, there was an increased awareness about Leaside at City Hall, and there were rumours that the tunnel might be closed off for good. The users of the tunnel who heard the rumours responded by contacting the Mayor to express their disapproval. The letters were forwarded to the Hastings Community Centre, and the Hastings-Sunrise NIST, and talk about Leaside was resurrected.

PREPARATION & RESEARCH

The project began with research as there was some information available on the tunnel. There were then several meetings with people and groups who are stakeholders in the project. After this, it became clearer what some of the users and residents concerns were. Here are some comments from parents and skateboarders who use Leaside, from a meeting in October 2002:

- There is need for a garbage receptacle and regular clean-ups
- Access needs to be improved (South side is too steep; muddy & dangerous)
- Lights need consistent maintenance & repair

- Graffiti adds to the tunnel's character – (graffiti has an outdated stereotype of being “gang-related” let's help educate neighbours that graffiti is not a threat -- painting workshops or murals at Leaside)
- Drainage is a problem; some sewers are plugged and manhole covers are even missing.
- Fear that if city is involved, the tunnel will become over-regulated
- The surface needs refinishing, dirty and too rough.

One of the first meetings was with Angela Ko, a city planner for the Hastings-Sunrise neighbourhood. She had several recommendations that she had heard through community meetings regarding the project as well:

- Safety is a primary concern to residents
- Art and youth issues are relevant to the community
- Tunnel must support use as a passage / pathway
- Should be no misuse of tunnel in the future.
- There should be a 1 year pilot project, including clean-ups.
- There should also be a “plan B” – in case the pilot project fails.

So the project began with both the user's and the resident's perspectives in mind. It seemed that one of the goals of the project should be to try to bring these two groups together. This would help to find out what each group wanted to see Leaside become. And if there were disagreements, a way could be provided for the groups to be brought together, so that each group could recognize each other's perspective and come to a compromise. Two questions had to be answered: what were the concerns of the users and the residents, and how could these groups be brought together to resolve some of these issues? This was to be the focus of the project for the summer. A survey was created as a tool to get a better idea about the different groups interested in Leaside, and what the

concerns of the groups might be. A copy of the survey has been included in the report (see Appendix 3).

There was much effort put into promotion of the project. Before both the Clean-up and BBQ event on July 19th and the Community Meeting on August 13th, posters were displayed at the Hastings Community Centre, Leaside Tunnel, along the Adanac Bike Route near Leaside, Hastings and Hwy #1 intersection, Hastings-Tillicum School, Kiwassa Neighbourhood House, Joy MacPhail's Office, Laughing Bean Coffee Shop, McGill Grocery, and Hastings Community Policing Centre and Wall Street Community Policing Centre. On July 14th, 10 volunteers from Hastings CPC handed out over 150 info brochures and surveys to neighbours living close to the tunnel, also promoting the July 19th Clean-up and BBQ, and the August 13th Community Meeting.

At the July 19th Clean-up and BBQ, there was a reporter from Independent Community Television who interviewed some people about the project and took some footage of the Clean-up. The piece was aired two weeks later on East Side Story; one of Shaw TV's public access channel programs. Also, at the Community Meeting, there was a reporter in attendance who did many interviews, and who is now planning on doing a story about Leaside for CBC Radio.

Listed below are some meetings and events that happened towards the completion of the project this summer. A more detailed list of each meeting and event has been provided as well (see Appendix 1).

One of the first meetings of the summer was with Doug Smith, who works for the City of Vancouver Engineering services. There was a discussion about the risks and potential of the space. He made it clear that it would be difficult to get the City to accept liability for the space as it currently sits. Here the idea of having a community clean-up

as one of the events for the project was discussed. Also discussed was the need for a community open-house to discuss plans for renovation of the tunnel.

A couple of weeks later, there was a meeting with Matt and Andrew – two dedicated Leaside users, the same ones who sent letters to the Mayor earlier that year. They expressed their love of the tunnel and their desire to help out to show that the tunnel is very important to both groups whom they felt they represented – the BMX riders (Matt) and the Mountain Bikers (Andrew). They explained that they felt there were many gaps of communication between the residents who had expressed concern about the tunnel and the users, and they wanted to help bridge those gaps. They heard about the meeting with Doug, and how the tunnel needed to be cleaned up and maintained better if there was going to be any future for Leaside. Matt and Andrew admitted that they were fearful of the space becoming over-regulated, but were willing to help out to keep Leaside open. They expressed that they would very much like to be involved in design meetings to discuss how the tunnel would be renovated.

On July 1st, there was a meeting with Jeannie, a resident that lives very close, in fact within view of, Leaside, and she expressed concerns with the safety and cleanliness of the tunnel. She also expressed that she felt that the users of the tunnel did not respect the residents and that is why she was concerned about the tunnel. She found out about the clean-up that was planned for the 19th of July, and she said she would like to come out for it to clean the tunnel up. She participated in the clean-up, and even when the clean-up was finished at 2pm, she asked for extra garbage bags and stayed late to do more cleaning up. As the project progressed, Jeannie became more and more involved and was increasingly concerned with a long-term solution for Leaside that would include regular clean-ups. She was even willing to leave one of her own garbage cans in the tunnel and empty it herself until the PNE or the City of Vancouver was willing to help out.

On July 4th, there was a meeting with Don, a resident who volunteers as a Block Watch captain. He expressed some of the concerns that he had with the tunnel, as well as his apprehension about drug users and homeless misusing the tunnel. As the project progressed, Don revealed that he likes to use the tunnel in the early mornings during the rainy months to do his Tai Chi exercises. One of the main concerns Don has is that the tunnel's entrance is very slippery and muddy to climb down when it is raining. He would very much like to see a proper entrance to the tunnel with a stairway and a railing built on the South side.

On July 14th, Clair from the Community Policing Centre brought 10 volunteers to the Hastings Community Centre with the intention of hand-delivering surveys and brochures about Leaside to the 9 square blocks around the tunnel. They met at Leaside and divided the information between us and split into a few groups. After about 1.5 hours of spreading the information to the neighbourhood, they met up and spoke about what they did. They came to the conclusion afterwards that people generally did not know much about Leaside, if anything at all. Later, the responses from the surveys confirmed this as well.

On July 19th, finally it came time for the Clean-up and BBQ. Some of the more



ambitious volunteers came to Leaside 2 hours early and got started on the clean-up.

There was a lot to clean! Good thing there were 12 volunteers to help complete the work. Layers upon layers of wood and dirt were at the North and South entrances, and nothing short of 4 hours of intensive hauling would be sufficient to remove all of it. Even after they completely filled the industrial sized dumpster that Engineering had provided

for the day, they continued to pile the wood up on the alleyway beside it. Jeannie and the other volunteers manned the garbage patrol and ended up filling at least (12) 40-gallon garbage bags full, mostly with McDonalds garbage and spray paint cans. They also found 3 needles, which was less than expected, as it had been many months since such a clean-up had been done. They ended the clean-up with a BBQ while one of the volunteers, Shelby, proceeded to show some bike moves on the ramps in the tunnel.

At the Vancouver Skate Park Coalition meeting on August 6th, there was discussion about the progress of the Leaside project thus far, and there was a lot of good feedback from coalition

members about ideas and how to help move the project along.

One of the ideas was to get McDonald's involved in helping keep Leaside clean.

The next day, the McDonald's



restaurant "across the street" from Leaside was notified about the cups and bags that were all over the tunnel. They said that they would call if they could help with this issue. That afternoon, the McDonald's area manager called, and said that he was willing to help out by sending employees down a few times a month to make sure the tunnel was clean of garbage from their restaurant. And it seems that they have been true to their word, as lately there have been less of their cups and bags lying around the tunnel. The PNE has also become involved since the clean-up, by providing a garbage can at the North end of the tunnel, to be emptied periodically.

On August 13th the community meeting was a great success; 31 people came out to discuss the project, and it was a good mix of committee members, residents, users, and

parents in attendance. The interaction that was happening during the meeting reflects well the values and concerns of the various stakeholders. All groups seemed to be interested in a long-term plan for the tunnel and the future of Leaside. Out of those concerns, there arose several conversations that are important to mention here.

Firstly, the interaction around the IDEAS table where people were encouraged to illustrate their own plans for the tunnel using markers and paper was very good. It gave a chance for everyone to draw out their ideas of the ideal Leaside.



Also there was a group of BMX riders who came out to support the project, and had some productive discussions about their desire to preserve Leaside. Many of the Vancouver Skate Park Coalition (VSPC) members were also in attendance, as the group has had an interest in Leaside for several years.



Leaside Lee even showed up to the meeting, and expressed concerns that all the effort that has been put into Leaside over the years should be recognized, and not wasted.

FINDINGS & RESULTS

There was a great effort put towards getting the surveys out to the residents that live near Leaside. Several volunteers helped out by volunteering at booths at community events, and even more came out to issue surveys and information to the houses around

Leaside. The City also got involved, and helped by sending out 740 surveys by mail.

Included is a map of the area that the mail-out went to (see Appendix 2).

The results of the survey seemed to be much of the same from the initial research process. Below, the results have been tabulated on a per-question basis, according to the most common answers, and highlighting some interesting responses. The results are based on 45 surveys completed to date. The results aim to accurately represent the groups involved, but this is by no means a professional survey. The survey has been used as a tool to get a better idea of what people think about Leaside. A full copy of the original survey has been attached as well (see Appendix 3).

Question #1: Do you currently use the Leaside tunnel? And if so, what do you use it for?

BMX or biking	8
Walk-through	6
Skateboarding	3
Graffiti	2
Tai Chi	1

Question #2: Do you know of any other ways that the area is being used?

BMX or biking	11
Skateboarding	9
Graffiti	9
Drug Use	2
Art Gallery	2
Filming	1

Question #3: What excites you most about Leaside?

It is a covered space when it rains	7
It is a place for youth to hang-out	6
It gives youth something to do and care about	5
Freedom / people enjoying themselves at their own pace	4
Nice graffiti	4
<i>It has been turned into something from nothing by the youth who use it.</i>	3

Question #4: What concerns do you have about the area?

Area might be used for Drugs	10
Decay from lack of maintenance, people will forget about it	7
Needs to be cleaned-up regularly	5
Safety	5
That the city might close the tunnel off	4
<i>That people won't recognize the great potential of this community space</i>	1

Question #5: In your opinion, what could be done to improve the area?

More clean-ups	10
Get money from the city to fix the lighting, drainage, improvements and designs...	7
Need better ramps in the tunnel	3
More landscaping	3
Better maintenance / organization	3
<i>Make it for everyone</i>	1

Question #6: Why are you interested in the Leaside project?

Because it is part of my community / I live close	7
I use it a lot and I really like it there	5
It is a place for youth	5
It engages community members	4
My kids like to use it	3
<i>It should be preserved</i>	2

CONCLUSION

In summary, Leaside tunnel is an important community space. A vast majority of all the groups surveyed (users, residents, community employees) would like to see a long-term solution for the tunnel. There was an effort to use the Community Meeting to raise awareness about Leaside in the neighbourhood. There was a corresponding concern at the Community Meeting by those who attended that there be more meetings to help generate excitement and support for the project in the community, and to keep the issues around Leaside fresh in everyone's minds.

Leaside is a valuable community space; users and residents have indicated that they care very much that Leaside is put to a beneficial use for all. There was an especially clear indication that the community supports Leaside as a place for youth, as it has been in the past. However, there is also an indication of fear that if the area decays, it would become a place for drug-use if it is not properly maintained. Many users, who have invested time maintaining Leaside expressed that they would like to get involved to help Leaside become a safe, well maintained place for youth. The users very much want to be able to keep Leaside alive, and have demonstrated that by volunteering and participating in the Leaside project throughout the summer. The skateboarders, BMX

riders, and graffiti artists that use Leaside should continue to manage the tunnel as they have been.

There has been much positive interaction between residents and users as a result of the community meeting, and there should be more meetings to help unite users and residents, so that they are ready to take ownership of the tunnel. Leaside needs improved drainage, garbage cans that are well maintained, pedestrian access through the tunnel, and landscaping to make it look like a more welcome place. The ramps inside the tunnel need to be repaired, and if they are no longer usable, removed. A design and cost estimate should be done with the Leaside community (users and residents) to determine what they would like to see the tunnel become; the needs of skaters, bike riders, artists, and pedestrians must be carefully considered.

EDITORIAL

There are several prominent aspects of youth culture today, such as BMX riding, skateboarding, and graffiti art, which are often misunderstood by non-youths. Many lines have been drawn in the sand, and clearly there is much pessimism about these aspects of youth culture. More recently, the City of Vancouver has been drawing lines that look a bit different; and it seems that there is some optimism about these aspects, as well.

However, whether optimistic or pessimistic, both sides often lack a sophisticated understanding of the issues that skateboarding, for example, faces. Growing up as a skater, I have learned that the best way to get to know skate culture is to ride a board. But not everyone does, and the realities of skating thus remain “secrets” to outsiders and are protected as such. However; building, sharing, learning, teamwork, and celebration are activities that build communities, and the skateboard community is no exception.

Leaside is one such community; it has been a place for youth to skateboard, BMX ride, and paint graffiti art for many years. There have been several dedicated groups of

users, and today, it continues to be a self-regulated place where young people can go to ride, skate, or paint without worrying about getting hassled. They are free to build ramps and paint murals, and since it is a covered area, Leaside can be used all year round. As a developer and a skater, my opinion is that if the community using Leaside are not both the authors and executors of Leaside's development, they will likely move on.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Leaside project recommends that:

- Someone be hired to take responsibility for further development of the Leaside project.
- This person have a good understanding of issues relevant to youth using the tunnel.
- The tunnel stay open and accessible for community use.
- If there is a need for maintenance or clean-up, users be contacted to complete maintenance and clean-ups *on their own*.
- If there are design meetings or further consultation, users & residents be the primary attendees of the meeting.
- Any new designs would favour the way Leaside has been used over the last several years as *a place for youth to freely recreate*.
- There be continued education to the community about the actual use of Leaside compared with the perceived use and fears that neighbours have.
- That all community agencies, listed in the "Introduction," and individuals involved in the project are kept up to date on the progress of the project. These are Matt, bikerockrevolution@hotmail.com, Dean ask@uniserve.com, Stefan buntinstation@hotmail.com, Matt smedboy@telus.net, and Andrew flowrider@shaw.ca.

APPENDIX 1

July 1st Booth = 10 surveys filled out & 3 volunteers recruited

July 5th Booth = 4 surveys filled out

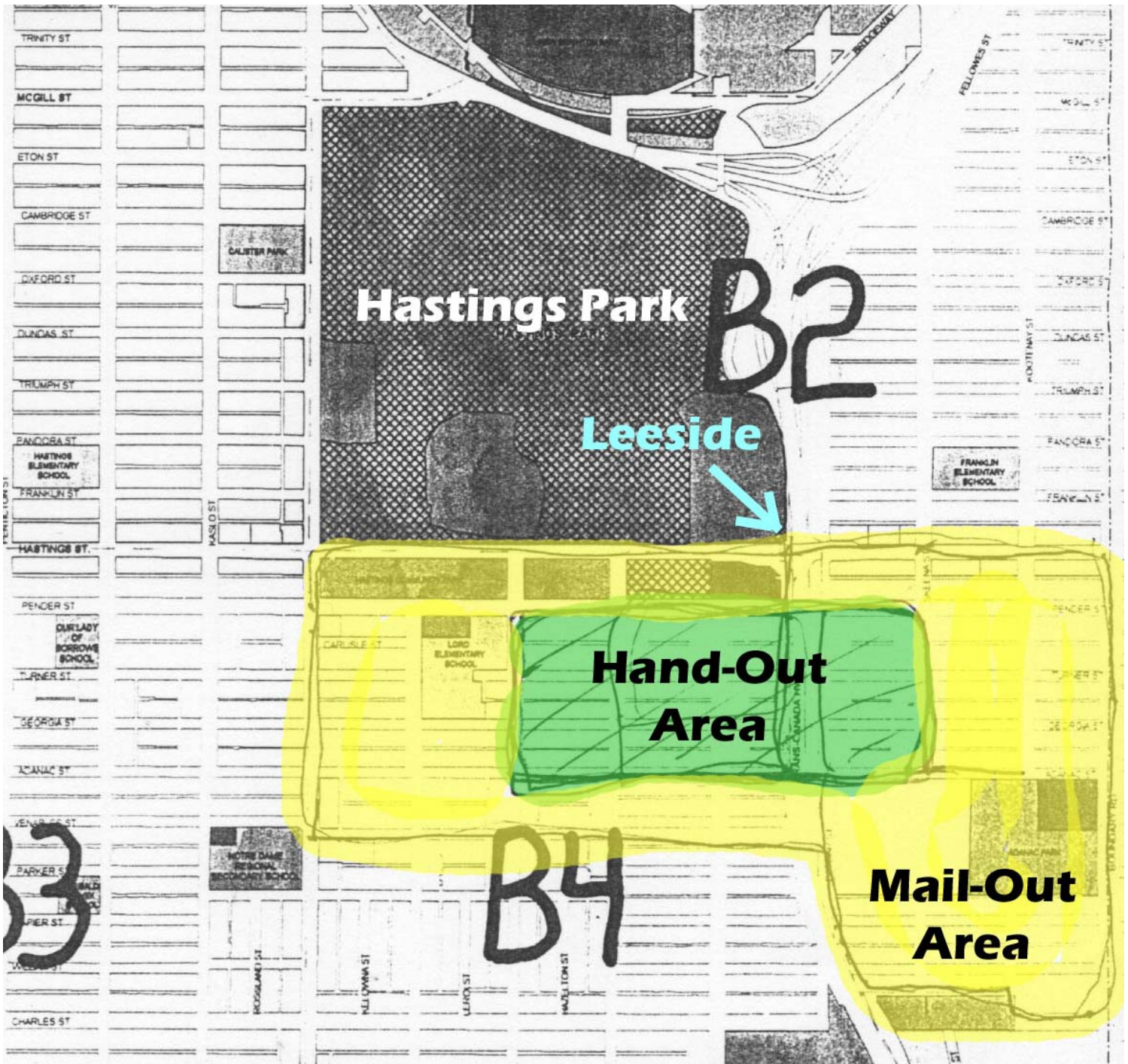
July 8th Booth = 1 volunteer recruited

July 19th Leaside Clean-up = 12 volunteers from neighbourhood filled up 1.5 dumpster loads with old wood and (12) 40-gallon garbage bags with trash. Barbecued 24 hot dogs and consumed 6 gallons of water and/or pop.

August 13th Leaside Meeting / Open House = 31 people attended, filled out surveys, drew plans for Leaside, and talked with each other for 2 hours.

Thursday May 29th	Community Safety Fair @ Pandora Park
Tuesday June 3rd	Meet Doug Smith from Engineering @ Leaside
Wednesday June 4th	Vancouver Skate Park Coalition Meeting @ Roundhouse
Thursday June 5th	Meet Clair MacGougan @ Hastings CPC
Friday June 6th	Meet Jennifer @ Hastings-Tillicum Community School
Friday June 6th	Meet Kathleen @ Kiwassa Neighbourhood House
Friday June 13th	Advisory Committee Meeting @ Hastings Community Centre (HCC)
Friday June 13th	Meeting with Mark Vulliamy @ Leaside
Thursday June 19th	Matt and Andrew @ Leaside
Monday June 23 rd	Meeting with Clair MacGougan and Michael
Tuesday June 24th	Meet Michael Gordon from VSPC @ Leaside
Wednesday June 25th	Meet Aviam @ Leaside
Thursday June 26th	Presentation to Hastings Park Conservancy @ HCC
Tuesday July 1st	Canada Day Celebration – 1 st Leaside Booth
Friday July 4th	Meeting with Don from Block Watch @ HCC
Saturday July 5 th	Hastings CPC Street Hockey Tournament – 2 nd Leaside Booth
Monday July 7th	Advisory Committee Meeting @ HCC
Tuesday July 8th	Hastings Park Community Forum Meeting – 3 rd Leaside Booth
Monday July 14 th	Hand-delivery of Surveys to neighbourhood
Saturday July 19 th	Leaside Clean-up & BBQ
Wednesday August 6th	VSPC Meeting at Roundhouse C.C.
Thursday August 7th	Meeting with McDonalds Manager
Tuesday August 12th	HCC Advisory Committee Meeting
Wednesday August 13th	Leaside Open House / Community Meeting

APPENDIX 2



APPENDIX 3*“Leeside” Project Survey*

Do you currently use the Leeside tunnel? And if so, what do you use it for?

Do you know of any other ways that the area is being used?

What excites you most about Leeside?

What concerns do you have about the area?

In your opinion, what could be done to improve the area?

Why are you interested in the Leeside project?

Would you attend a community meeting or event about Leeside this summer?

Yes / No *(please circle one)*

What is your contact information?

Name: _____

Address: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Age: **0-25** **25-50** **50 +**

I am a Hastings-Sunrise resident: **Yes / No**

I live within 5 blocks of Leeside: **Yes / No**