

Alphabet's Sidewalk Labs unveils its high-tech 'city-within-a-city' plan for Toronto

Sidewalk Labs, Alphabet's smart city subsidiary, released its massive plan Monday to transform a slice of Toronto's waterfront into a high-tech utopia. Eighteen months in the making and clocking in at 1,524 pages, the plan represents Alphabet's first, high-stakes effort to realize Alphabet CEO Larry Page's long-held dream of a city within a city to experiment with innovations like self-driving cars, public Wi-Fi, new health care delivery solutions, and other city planning advances that modern technology makes possible.

Previously, Sidewalk Labs called it "a neighborhood built from the internet up." But on Monday, Sidewalk Labs CEO Dan Doctoroff went a step further to describe it as "the most innovative district in the world."

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Sidewalk Toronto's original pitch was to build a high-tech community on a mostly vacant 12-acre patch of an industrial waterfront site called Quayside, just east of the city's core. The plan includes:

- Ten new buildings of mixed-use development consisting primarily of thousands of new residential units, as well as retail and office spaces, all made from mass timber
- A proposal to extend the city's light-rail system to serve the new neighborhood
- Redesigning streets to reduce car use and promote biking and walking
- Installation of public Wi-Fi, in addition to other

sensors to collect “urban data” to better inform housing and traffic decisions, for example

- Proposal to reduce greenhouse gases by up to 89 percent
- Building the new Canadian headquarters of Google on the western edge of Villiers Island

This plan is an absolute unit.

Photo by James Bareham / The Verge

The release of the document kicks off what is sure to be a lengthy and contentious public vetting process, involving parties such as Waterfront Toronto – Sidewalk Labs’ nonprofit, government-appointed partner on the project – city councillors and staff at city hall, along with input from provincial and federal politicians.

Sidewalk Labs says it will spend \$1.3 billion on the project in the hopes of spurring \$38 billion in private sector investment by 2040. A third-party research firm analyzed the project and found it could potentially help create 44,000 jobs and generate \$4.3 billion in annual tax revenue.

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Since it first announced its plan in 2017, Sidewalk Labs has faced constant criticism, both from residents of Toronto and others who oppose urban profiteering by tech giants, about the opacity of its plans. That criticism heated up earlier this year after *The Toronto Star* published a report based on leaked documents that revealed the company to have grander ambitions than just a 12-acre lot. The documents revealed Sidewalk Labs was interested in developing a larger 350-acre swath that encompasses the current parcel.

That concept made it into the master plan, under the heading “Innovative Development and Economic Acceleration” district, or IDEA district. But Doctoroff insisted that it wasn’t a land

grab by Sidewalk Labs, but rather a proposal to expand the boundaries of the project only if the local government approves it. Even then, Sidewalk Labs would not be the lead developer on future projects in the IDEA district, he added.

In an open letter published Monday, Waterfront Toronto Chairman Stephen Diamond sought to distance himself from the master plan, insisting that his group “did not co-create” it, but will be responsible for approving it. Based on his group’s initial review, there are a number of proposals “where it is clear that Waterfront Toronto and Sidewalk Labs have very different perspectives about what is required for success,” he wrote in the letter.

Diamond criticized the proposal for the expanded IDEA district as “premature,” and noted big infrastructure projects, such as the extension of the light-rail network, would require commitments from the government that are not yet in place. “These proposals raise important implementation concerns. They are also not commitments that Waterfront Toronto can make,” Diamond said.

In a news briefing Monday, Doctoroff sought to blunt any backlash by committing to working closely with the government and community residents on the project. He called it “the natural process of working out a very complex arrangement.”

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/24/18715486/alphabet-sidewalk-labs-toronto-high-tech-city-within-a-city-plan>