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GTA

Toronto's bid to clean up north George St. starts with derelict homes

By **Sadiya Ansari** Staff Reporter

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The city is pushing forward to acquire three derelict homes in a block some residents call “little Detroit,” notorious for wandering addicts and the crack dealers who prey on them.

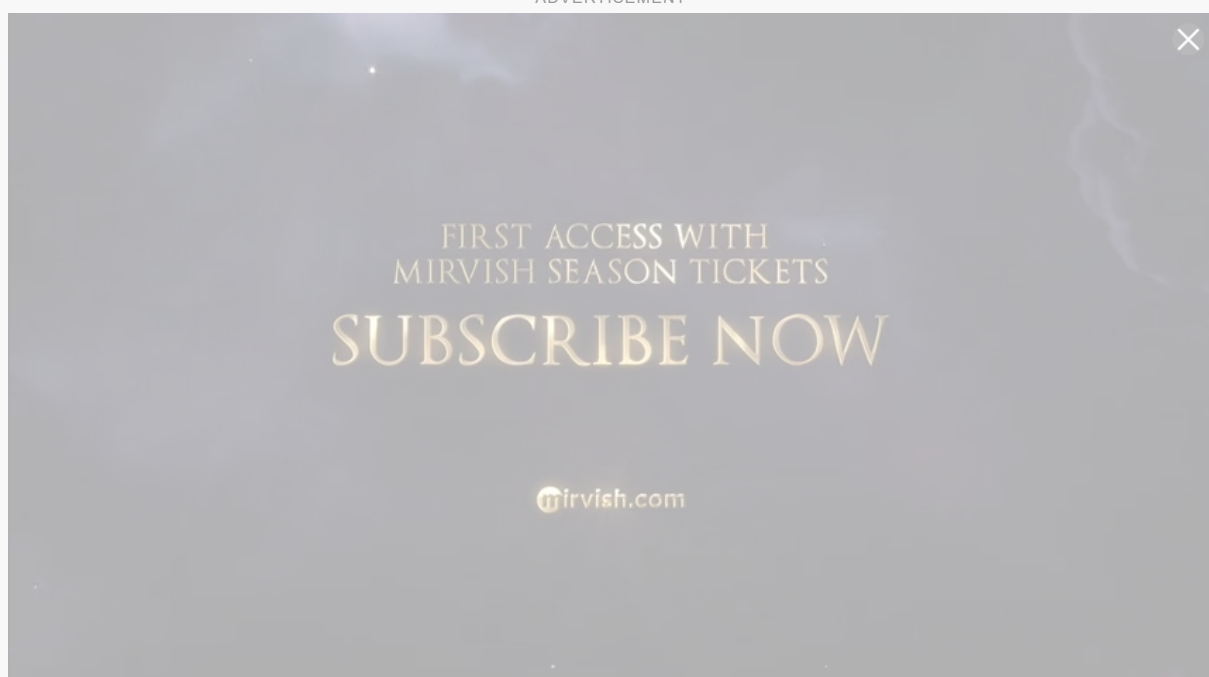
It's part of a plan, years in the making, to revitalize the east end of downtown, said Ward 27 Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam. George St., just east of Jarvis St., is “ground zero,” and for the downtown east plan to work the street must change, she said.

“There is no other street comparable to George St.,” she said. “I have yet to meet anyone who is not alarmed to see the conditions.”

The northern block of the street should be prime real estate — it boasts 19th-century homes, it's steps from the Ryerson campus west of it and it's bookended by two major streets to the north and south, Dundas and Gerrard. It's a short walk to the Eaton Centre.

But a row of eight homes, boarded up and neglected, have been abandoned for years. The three homes to be acquired are part of this row. The other five were purchased last year by the city.

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Buying the homes has a dual purpose — moving to protect seven of the eight homes that have heritage designation, and providing space to expand the largest homeless shelter in the city, Seaton House.

The massive building on the east side of the street houses more than 540 homeless men, many dealing with mental health and addiction issues, drawn to the only city shelter where alcohol is permitted. Its upcoming renovation and expansion is key to the street's redevelopment, shifting focus to more long-term care and assisted living. This in turn will lead to a more stable, less transient population.

Even in the middle of February, despite the cold, many people loiter outside the shelter. "I fought very, very hard to get rid of Seaton House," said Julie Harland-Bettany, who has lived on the street since 2002.

After renting on the street for two years, the 36-year-old bought the townhome next door for \$180,000. Since Seaton House won't be moving, she at least wants the emergency shelter gone completely because she's fed up with the drug dealers and addicts that the shelter attracts to the street. She says her garden is regularly trashed, her garage has been broken into and days before Christmas, her car was vandalized.

Investment consultant Brandon Sage, 33, bought a property across from Seaton House as a speculative investor, but after living there for a year, he moved. Constant harassment from people on the street and police were a factor, but what ultimately pushed him out is watching the same people return time and again to get their drug fix.

"You would watch them slowly change from their addiction to the substance," he said. "They became thinner, they became twitchy, they became noticeable unhealthy with sores on their face — you just see the descent."

As part of the North George St. Working Group, Nick Culverwell proposed that less density at the Seaton House site would be key to changing both the reality and perception of the street as "menacing." He lives further south on George — near Shuter St. — and says that currently, the contrast between blocks couldn't be more stark.

"It's literally like walking into a parallel universe," he said.

Culverwell's encouraged the city is taking an active role, hoping to finally see progress on what he calls the "immovable object" — a block seemingly immune to community efforts to change.

Council will vote on initiating the process to expropriate the homes at the end of next month. Under provincial legislation, the city can take land without consent if it's in the public interest, though it still has to compensate the owner with a fair market value for the property.

Wong-Tam said the city hoped to settle on a private transaction with the owners, but wasn't able to. The owners, Spike Capital Corp. and architectural firm KMAI, were part of a proposed a public-private partnership in 2009 that later fell through.

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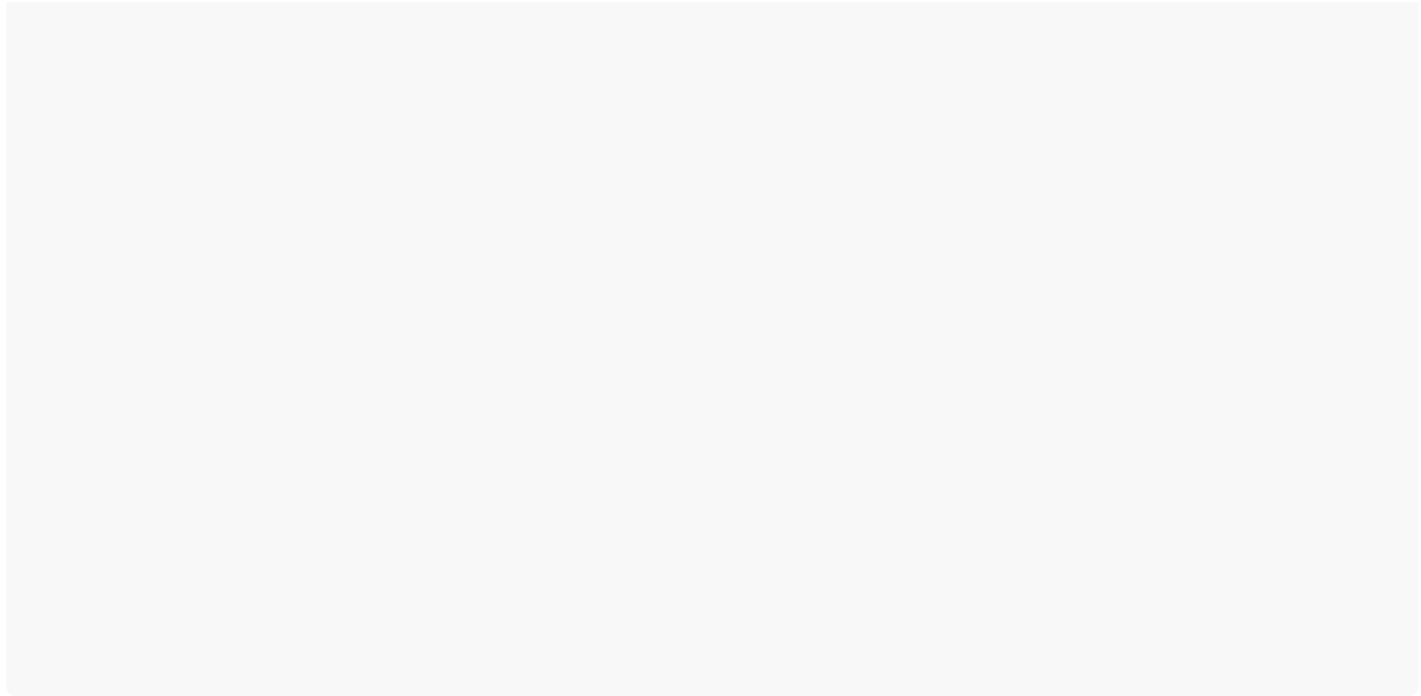
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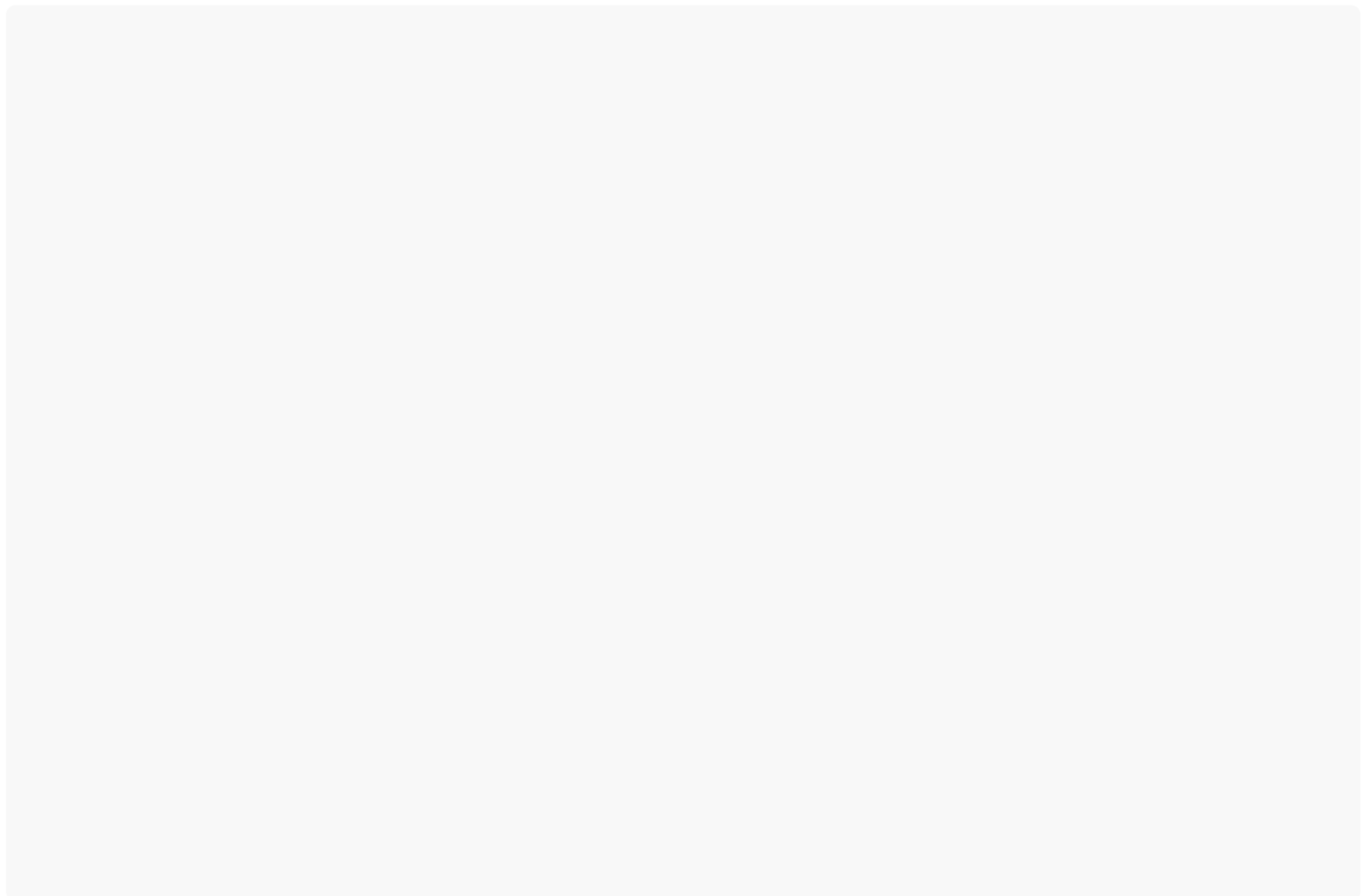
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