

A Community Vision for the Vale of Avoca Ravine



Postcard of Reservoir Park (Excerpt), c. 1909;
Toronto Public Library, Baldwin Collection of Canadiana.

At its essence, Toronto's first Ravine Strategy will help to support a ravine system that is a natural, connected sanctuary essential for the health and well-being of the city, where use and enjoyment support protection, education and stewardship.

-- **Toronto Ravine Strategy**, p. i

Ravines will require consistent and significant investments to be able to manage the multiple pressures from intensification, increased recreational use, climate change and weather events, invasive species, and others.

-- **Toronto Ravine Strategy**, p. 24

**Prepared by the Midtown Ravines Group
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vale of Avoca, one of Toronto's **most scenic ravines and natural habitats**, is a neglected civic resource, subjected to decades of deterioration. This document —developed by the Midtown Ravines Group, an organization representing eight residents' associations in midtown Toronto— presents a vision and plan to restore the Vale as a destination and ecological oasis in the heart of a rapidly growing urban corridor.

We believe it to be critical to understand the Vale's importance not only as a rare and sensitive environmental zone, but also as a place of historical importance, given that it is one of the city's oldest public recreation landscapes, being in continuous public use since the mid-nineteenth century. Our historical places are few, so their care and maintenance should be viewed as a **generational trust**. This is what is driving our work.

The Vale of Avoca ravine runs south for 1.5 km from Mt Pleasant Cemetery, under the St Clair Ave bridge to connect with the Park Drive ravine at Mount Pleasant Road and is a vital piece of the city's natural infrastructure for stormwater management.

Neglect over many years has caused **serious and continuing deterioration** of the ravine and its ecology. Our vision for restoration of the Vale of Avoca demands a **comprehensive approach** to restoring the ravine:

- **Reconfiguring and rebuilding** the now dilapidated and hazardous **trail network**, providing a combination of well-designed access points, loop trails and through routes connecting with other elements of Toronto's ravine network.
- **Fixing stream bed and slope erosion**, which have been exacerbated by recent increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, to ensure resiliency.
- **Removing and controlling invasive varieties** dominating the ravine habitat, which are contributing to a loss of biodiversity and degrading this Environmentally Significant Area.

Our plan embraces the laudable but unfulfilled vision of Toronto's Ravine Strategy, adopted by City Council in 2017. That Strategy underlines the importance of this unique ecosystem in responding to climate change and biodiversity loss and sustaining the physical and mental health of the city's residents. The plan will depend on the active engagement of local residents and organizations along with those of our Councillors, City staff, other stakeholders and private donors.

The time for this ambition is now, given the massive densification planned for the area combined with the increased potential for significant climate events. These two realities necessitate a new approach – a multi-stakeholder partnership – and a coherent and comprehensive Master Plan versus the piecemeal project by project approach.

The restoration of this **historical and environmental treasure** is an opportunity to create a world-class recreational and ecological resource for the rapidly growing population of midtown Toronto.



Reservoir Park, 1914
(Toronto Public Library)

1. THE CURRENT STATE OF THE RAVINE

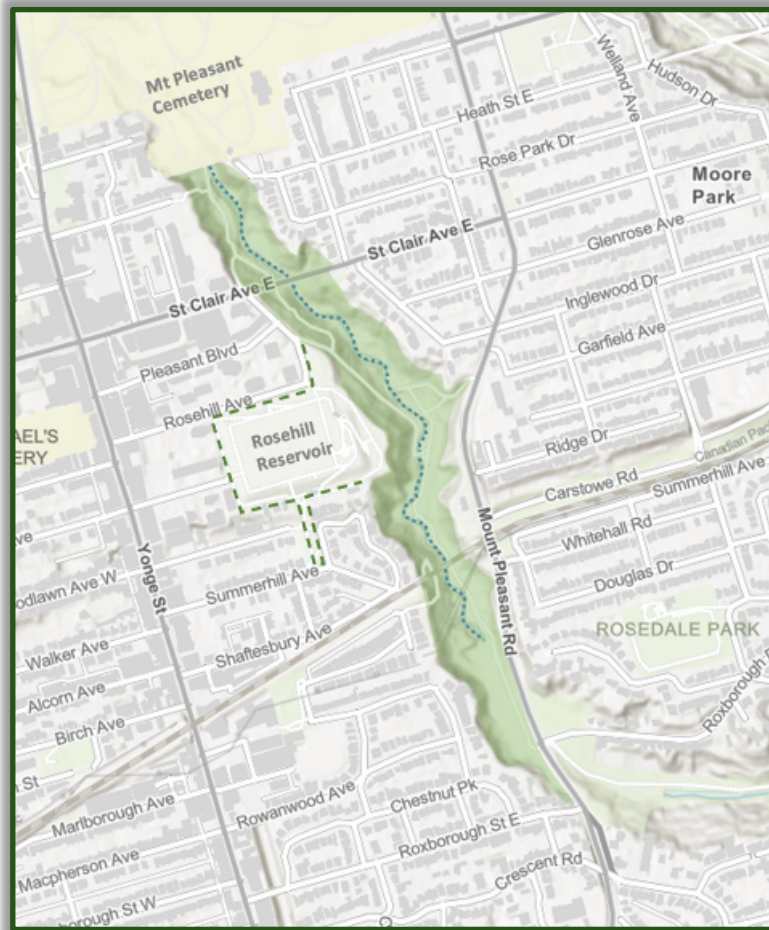
1.1 Introduction to the Vale of Avoca ravine

The Vale of Avoca ravine is an amazing green space in midtown Toronto, running 1.5 kilometers south from Mt Pleasant Cemetery to Mount Pleasant and Roxborough, where it connects to the Park Drive ravine between North and South Rosedale.

Originally part of a 12 km long stream — Yellow Creek — flowing from Downsview to the Don River, this ravine is now the only remaining place in the city where the creek still flows above ground as an open stream. From its source in Downsview to the Cemetery, the once-green creek is now an underground storm sewer, draining an area of about 10 square kilometers that is now paved over.

The area of the ravine between its north and south access points is about 17 hectares, which includes parts of some private lots extending down the ravine slopes. It is spanned by only two high-level bridges: the St Clair Avenue bridge and the CP Rail train bridge. The width of the ravine ranges up to approximately 150m, with a maximum depth of 25m.

The entire area of the Vale of Avoca Ravine is governed by Toronto’s *Ravine and Natural Feature Protection By-Law*. The part of the ravine where the Yellow Creek is above ground has been designated an *Environmentally Significant Area (ESA)*.



1.2 The City’s Ravine Strategy

Toronto’s Ravine Strategy was adopted by City Council in 2017, establishing key principles to “guide the city in future decisions for ravine management”, based on the recognition that Toronto’s ravine system is a **globally unique feature of Toronto’s landscape**, providing a “natural, connected sanctuary essential for the health and well-being of the city.”

Regrettably, this landmark strategy remains under-funded and, as a result, progress on its 20 stated actions remains very limited. As relates to the Vale of Avoca:

- Among the 86 designated ESAs, it is **one of only 10 targeted for priority investment**. To date, however, there is no public ESA management plan for the Vale of Avoca, more than seven years after the Strategy's adoption.
- Remediation projects have been ad hoc responses to only the most pressing problems.
- Planning for the Vale remains **highly disjointed** among involved departments and agencies, despite the establishment of a cross-department working group that includes community stakeholders.
- It is increasingly clear that extreme weather events have a major impact on the geomorphology of the Vale of Avoca ravine; despite this, it appears that both potential remedial and preventive measures are considered in isolation from the comprehensive requirements of the ravine.
- Access to the area is poor and has **continued to deteriorate** despite adoption of the Ravine Strategy. The St. Clair access point (closest to the subway and Yonge/St Clair intersection) has now been closed for more than five years.

Though unfulfilled, the Ravine Strategy clearly articulates why areas like the Vale of Avoca are vital to the surrounding area, and to the city overall, and is the underlying inspiration and guide for this vision and plan. As articulated in the Ravine Strategy, implementation of this vision in the Vale of Avoca will make a vital contribution to the mental and physical health of residents and will be an important measure of response to pressures from climate change and biodiversity loss.

1.3 The ravine's history

The Vale of Avoca has been an **important recreational resource** for Toronto, in continuous public use since the mid-nineteenth century. Then, it was a Victorian-era destination park, at the end of the horse-drawn streetcar from downtown Toronto on Yonge Street. There was also a neighbouring amusement park in Summerhill on what was then a large estate, linked to the park in the ravine. Two bridges capable of one-way horse-cart traffic spanned the stream, one connecting Rosehill Avenue to Inglewood and the other connecting the east-side and west-side Summerhill Avenues before the construction of the CP railway interrupted the connection.

Stone walls were constructed in the late 1800s to channel the stream, a channelization that was adequate to handle then-current stormwater flows. At that time, the land to the north of St Clair was largely rain-absorbing farmland and the impact of the combination of the hardening of that landscape and climate change were not even imagined.

Preserving and recognizing as much as possible of the ravine's history and making it known through plaques and displays is one of the aims of our vision. This ravine will also provide valuable opportunities to recognize Toronto's indigenous heritage, given the area's proximity to the Lower Don Wonscotonach Lands and other local historical reference points.

1.4 The neighbourhood's growing population

The population of the neighbourhood's adjacent to the Vale are experiencing **an unprecedented development acceleration**. Between Davenport and Davisville, the rapidly expanding Yonge Street corridor is expected over the next two decades to grow by 15-20,000 additional residents, with almost as many expected in the Davisville area north of Merton over to Mt Pleasant and other connected growing population centers linked to the Vale by the city's **Belt Line trail**.

The scale of anticipated development in the immediate area —with multiple 30- to 50-storey towers already approved or being applied for— will put growing pressure on the natural environment of the Vale of Avoca ravine. In addition, there is further population pressure from the Yonge/Eglinton growth center to the north, which is earmarked to grow by 50-60,000 over the next few decades, and from the similarly large growth along the Bloor Street corridor to the south. The young adults likely to rent many of the new investor-owned units in these developments will have an acute need for recreational resources and access to green space. The anticipated population growth highlights the need for **sustained and substantial investment to restore and protect the ravine.**

1.5 The current state of the Vale of Avoca ravine

The Yellow Creek ravine is subject to continuing degradation, reflecting a number of interdependent factors.

Trails and access. The trail layout is very poor with respect to through-routes connecting the north and south ends of the ravine (linking the Mt Pleasant Cemetery to the city trail down Park Drive Reservation to the Brickworks). Access to the adjacent population areas and transit connections are limited by closed stairways and deficient wayfinding. Due to the single crossing-point of Yellow Creek, the opportunities to follow loop trails of varying distances are virtually non-existent. Access points, walking routes, and trail infrastructure are severely impacted by erosion and are poorly maintained. At some locations in the ravine, trail erosion has become a material hazard to trail walkers. There is a complete absence of amenities, such as rest area benches, observation points, or wayfinding.

Erosion. The combined result of climate change and urban intensification has seen an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, resulting in accelerating erosion of ravine slopes. Serious erosion problems have become manifest in collapsed stream walls, actual and potential collapses of ravine slopes, and falling trees undercut by the surge of water during frequent storms. Trails have been undercut and have, in some areas, collapsed. While some urgent repairs have been effected, the state of the ravine continues to deteriorate. Extreme weather events are outstripping City investments.

Invasives. The Vale of Avoca is over-run with invasive species. In the absence of concerted remediation efforts, invasives will continue to further degrade the ravine's biodiversity. The most predominant invasives are Norway Maples (on the ravine slopes) and Japanese Knotweed (on the stream banks), along with colonies of Phragmites that will continue to spread. Other invasives, such as common buckthorn, dog-strangling vine, and garlic mustard are distributed throughout the ravine.

Overall, the condition of the Vale of Avoca ravine represents a shortfall relative to the City's stated goals of its own Ravine Strategy and a lost opportunity to create a thriving ravine immediately adjacent to a fast-growing population. This condition is in spite of the fact that the Vale of Avoca was identified as one of ten priority investment areas in the Strategy's implementation.

2. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

In the following sections we outline a vision and a plan. Our vision: a well-maintained woodland environment that provides a green haven for midtown Toronto. Our plan: a set of goals for restoration and remediation met through a combination of City investment and private funds.

2.1 Restored connections, a revived ecosystem, a community asset

Our plan provides a wonderful opportunity to meet the aspiration of the Ravine Strategy ‘**for people to connect with nature and the city’s rich history**’, reviving a degraded link in the city’s trail network, inviting residents and visitors to explore and connect.

The Vale of Avoca offers an exceptional opportunity to escape the city’s urban environment and connect with nature. The ravine’s footpaths are unique and warrant restoration and preservation. The current network has a number of important aspects that enhance its value to the city and the surrounding communities, including the unusual number of entrances that provides easy access to the ravine for a number of physically separated communities – Deer Park, Summerhill, North and South Rosedale, Moore Park, Davisville, and the ABC and Cottingham areas to the west.

A well-designed north-south link compatible with its woodland setting will complete a **7km loop trail** connecting the Belt Line trail and Mt Pleasant Cemetery to the Brickworks and Lower Don through both the Yellow Creek and Mud Creek trail, along with a connection to Bathurst and Eglinton along the Belt Line trail. This trail will become an iconic city walk for both residents of Toronto and visitors. Better walking routes and accesses across the ravine will benefit neighbourhood connectivity.

Taken together the footpaths combine to create walking loops from each of the access points through some of the most scenic parts of the ravine, connecting to a north-south “through” trail that enhances local loop options. We envisage forest paths, not roads. Our goal is trails that continue to welcome wildlife, using congenial surfaces, while making the passage less hazardous for users – and keeping them on the trails rather than trampling the fragile ecosystem. The existing trail network has evolved organically, over many years



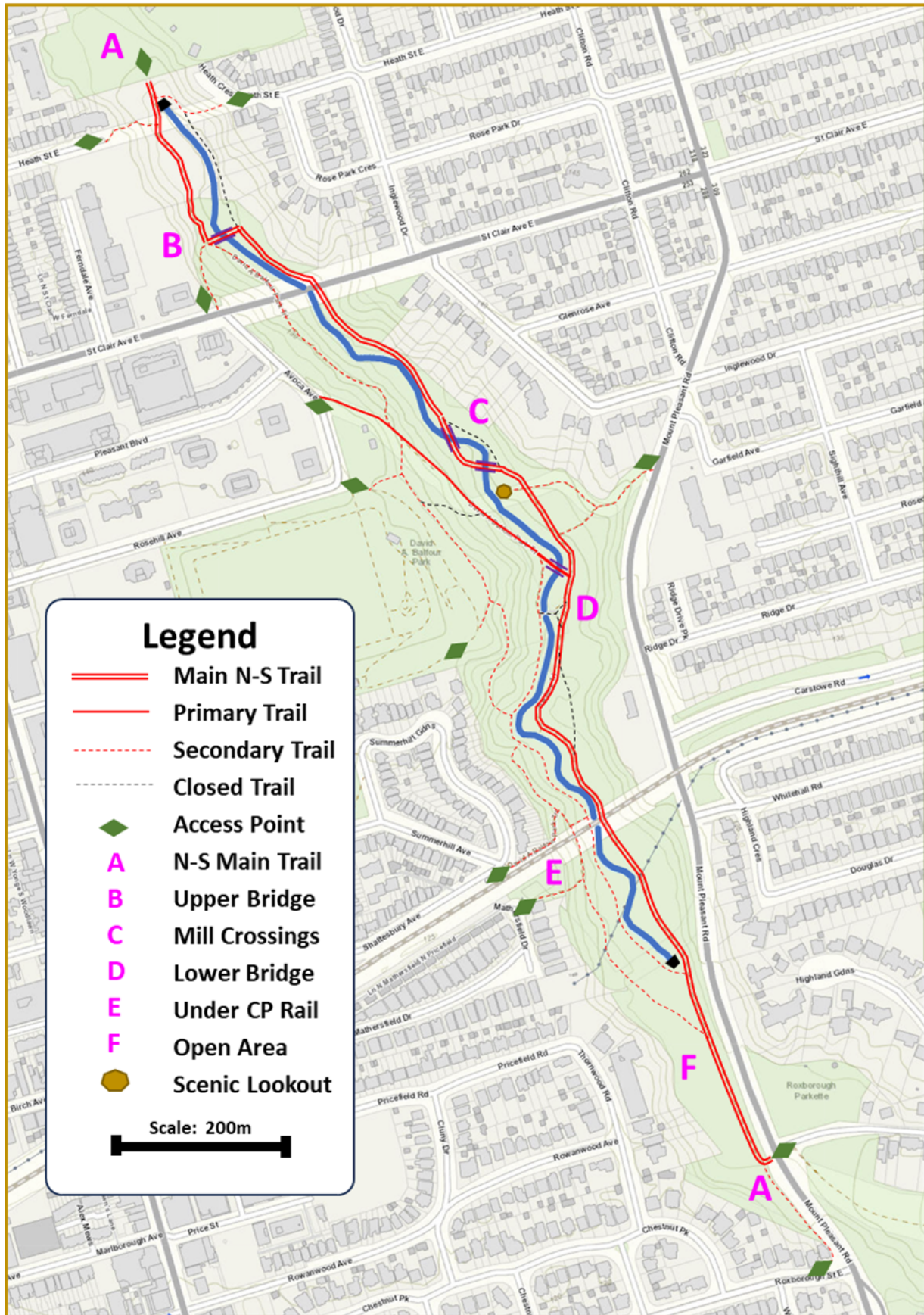
The Vale of Avoca Completes an Iconic 7km Walking Loop to the Brickworks, Connecting with the westward Belt Line and Lower Don Trails

Our proposed vision for the Vale of Avoca trail system is based on the following principles:

1. The network should provide for a range of trail experiences for public enjoyment, education, and recreation, with a strong primary emphasis on ecosystem and heritage protection.
2. A natural-surface trail network would be most consistent with the ravine’s natural setting.
3. Current access points should be preserved and refurbished where needed.
4. The network should take advantage of existing pathways.
5. A primary north-south through-route should connect to adjacent green space and trails, suitable for trails users of different abilities.
6. Loop trail routes within the ravine should enable users to enjoy the local ravine setting.
7. Where possible, stairs should be unobtrusive steps, blending into the environment.
8. The upgraded trail system should include appropriate signage, lookouts, and rest spots.
9. The trail system must be supported by a realistic maintenance program.

A **proposed trail system design** is set out in the map on the next page. Lettering on the map keys to descriptions on the following page.

Vale of Avoca Proposed Trail Network



A reconfigured primary north-south route (A-A) will benefit from a far more gradual grade change than the steep slopes and stairways of the current trail on the west side and provide a key missing link.

An upgraded St. Clair access point (B) will connect the ravine trails to residents and businesses in the Yonge-St Clair area, including the TTC subway. Significant work in this area will be needed to repair the access route down from the street level and to fix the major erosion in the area. This point would be an appropriate location for a new creek crossing to access the proposed main trail on the east side of the ravine.

Reconfiguration of the Inglewood mill site (C) is needed to address dramatic erosion of the stretch of Yellow Creek below Inglewood Drive. A set of two bridges is proposed to wind back and forth across the creek. This element will create a particularly attractive setting and will allow the needed restoration work to highlight historic features of this location.

Existing pedestrian bridge area (D). Significant erosion is occurring around the remaining footbridge across the creek, requiring additional capacity to handle stormwater surges. It would be preferable if a configuration could be found that would preserve this historic channel and crossing location.

Access points near CP rail bridge (E). The existing stairways down into the ravine on either side of the rail bridge end in a mid-level trail that is heavily eroded, dangerous during rainstorms, and badly in need of repair. The unsafe access routes from the mid-level path down to the stream-side path need to be upgraded.

Southern open area (F). The grassy area near the southern access point is markedly different from the rest of the ravine, potentially a place for picnic tables and possibly a public washroom. Currently used as a staging area for construction, it needs a redesign and some amenities.

The areas described above are highlighted because they involve the most significant improvements to the trail system, and because they are all tied to the remediation of the most serious areas of stream bed and ravine slope erosion. Given that the needed erosion remediation will substantially change the terrain in the affected areas, it makes sense to include the new trail configuration within the scope of the respective erosion project components. Making trail reconstruction a separate subsequent project means unnecessarily closing the paths twice, along with repeated disruption of natural habitats.

2.2 Protecting the ravine from erosion

The remediation of ravine erosion is a foundational component of this plan and will need to address the effects of past erosion on the stream bed, retaining walls, and ravine slopes. Left unaddressed, the condition of the ravine will continue to deteriorate, with escalation of damage to the area and of the cost of its remediation.

The hydromorphic state of the ravine has been analyzed in a Geomorphic Systems Master Plan (GSMP) commissioned by Toronto Water, which we understand is to be made public in early spring 2025. In addition, design studies for sections of the stream in which the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) is undertaking remediation work will inform the design of stream remediation work throughout the open section of the ravine.

The remediation and erosion control work will be expensive. The current TRCA stream remediation projects below Summerhill (~180 m) and Heath Crescent (~120 m) have estimated costs of \$2 and \$3+ million respectively, an average cost of \$17,500 per meter of project length.

Extrapolating based on the length of each project and assuming substantial use of armour stone revetments (see photo), anticipated costs of stream remediation are shown below:

Location	Preliminary Cost Estimate
North of St Clair bridge (~150m)	\$2-4 million (stream remediation only)
St Clair bridge to Inglewood sink hole (~400m)	\$6-8 million (includes repairs to Avoca storm sewer outfall and slope stabilization above)
Inglewood sink hole to existing pedestrian bridge (~140m)	\$2-3 million
Near pedestrian bridge	\$1-2 million
CP bridge to south outlet (~250 m)	\$3-5 million (lower priority work)
Total estimated cost (preliminary)	Approximately \$14-22 million

In the absence of detailed design studies, these cost estimates are little better than informed guesses. However, they indicate approximate magnitudes. They do not include the costs of bridges and trail infrastructure or of ecological remediation (see sections 2.3 and 2.4 below).

We do not assess the cost of potential slope stabilization work other than for the slope above the Avoca storm sewer outfall. We anticipate that controlling stream erosion will prevent significant slope erosion by removing the likelihood of slope undercutting.



Current TRCA design example (project below Summerhill). Note the substantial widening of the stream, the energy-reducing waterfall, and protected armour-stone (granite block) walls. All necessary to withstand 21st century storms.

Future work plans should take an expansive view of erosion control requirements, so that remedies will safeguard the ravine integrity generally, and not specific project locations in isolation. Project goals should address stream functions broadly, including stream bank stability, erosion reduction, stormwater conveyance, and habitat integrity.

The key point we make is the need to **identify the complete scope of required remediation**, rather than planning on a piecemeal basis derived from current budgetary constraints.

We suggest that alternative plans be developed for construction staging, assuming different levels of privately raised additional funding, to **minimize ravine closings and avoid duplicated costs**. A minimalist and reactive approach to ravine problems will continue to waste invested resources.

It is worth noting that, reflecting Toronto Water risk assessments, infrastructure repairs (other than the Avoca storm sewer outfall included above) are not included in the foregoing cost estimates. If other sewer repairs will be required, it is important that they be reflected in the erosion control plan now, so that wasteful duplication of work (and unnecessary ravine closings) is avoided.

2.3 Restoring and protecting ravine ecology

A major ecological challenge for Yellow Creek is the **management of invasive species** infestations. A range of invasives has been identified that have a major impact on the ravine’s biodiversity and ecological health. These will need to be addressed over time by a combination of professionals and community groups dedicated to preserving and restoring Toronto’s green health.

Further, it is important to stress the need for an **ongoing maintenance program**. The last significant program of ecological maintenance (thinning invasives in the area below Summerhill) occurred in 2001 — **twenty-four years ago**. Without ongoing maintenance, ecological capital projects quickly revert to their former state.

We estimate the cost of an initial program of remediation (similar to the 2001 initiative but applied to the entire ravine ecosystem) to be on the order of \$2-4 million.

2.4 Investing in the trail network, overall costs

To provide a ballpark estimate of the costs of the trail network we propose, we append the following estimated costs of key components:

Trail Element	Preliminary Cost Estimate
Pedestrian bridge north of St Clair	\$1-2 million
Pedestrian bridges at Inglewood mill site	\$3-4 million (includes viewpoint)
Primary north-south route	\$1 million (includes construction of east-side path below St Clair road bridge)
Secondary trails repair and remediation	\$1-2 million (with stairs and amenities)
Total estimated cost (preliminary)	\$6-9 million

As for other cost estimates, these are no more than informed guesses, indicative only. The following table summarizes the likely total capital costs of the plan we propose:

Plan component	Preliminary Cost Estimate
Erosion control	\$14-22 million
Ecological remediation	\$2-4 million
New and upgraded trails	\$6-9 million
Total estimated cost (preliminary)	\$22-35 million

These estimates will be refined as detailed design proceeds.

2.5 Project implementation: Priorities and building-blocks

This plan sets out a holistic vision for the ravine that can be put into effect as a unitary, integrated project, with a defined timeframe, over a finite period.

Indicative Project Timeline	
2025-26	Stakeholder consultation, planning, preliminary design work, fund raising
2026-27	Detailed design and costing, fund raising, organization of Conservancy
2027-30	Implementation including construction

3. THE WAY FORWARD

Our mission is to **rescue this important public amenity** from its current state of disrepair, to restore it for the enjoyment of future residents and to preserve it as an important natural habitat.

We look forward to working with local residents' associations, our Councillors, City staff, and other stakeholders to achieve the vision presented here. Our intent is to develop a properly costed overall plan that we can take to potential private donors, not only to support capital projects but also to ensure ongoing maintenance. The total capital costs (estimated at \$22-35 million) are a very modest amount compared to the cost of developments planned for the neighbouring area.

We propose a joint initiative of the City and private donors to raise the necessary capital funds, and potentially a Vale of Avoca Conservancy to fund and manage maintenance of the upgraded resource.

We are driven and passionate about this project. We are confident that we can find an equally passionate audience of citizens committed to **the restoration of a historically and environmentally meaningful part of the Toronto landscape** that will provide the growing midtown Toronto population with **a world-class recreational and ecological resource**.