



Year in Review

Ed Hore, Chair, Waterfront for All, December 12, 2023

Waterfront for All is an umbrella group of residents' associations and other groups interested in the revitalization of the Toronto waterfront from the Rouge River in the east to the Etobicoke boundary in the west. We love the waterfront and are interested in what happens to it.

Here's a brief run-down on things that happened since my last update on May 24, 2022.

Water Levels

Everyone remembers the flood years in 2017 and 2019. There's been no flood since. In late November, the water level on Lake Ontario in late November was about the same as last year, very close to the average. You can check water levels [here](#).

Of course, we don't know how often flooding will happen in years to come. The assumption has to be that we'll get flooding again sometime.

TRCA projects

Toronto Region and Conservation Authority (TRCA) has proposed a number of ways to reduce the effect of future floods on Toronto Island, and held consultations. See [here](#). It is finalizing an environmental assessment now.

TRCA also led a three-phase erosion-control project focussed on the south-western outer side of the Island which faces the prevailing wind and waves. The final stage, involving big sand dunes and natural plantings near Gibraltar Point, was completed 2023.

Johanna Flyte of TRCA spoke in our Speaker Series on March 28, 2023 about TRCA's many projects across the entire 46-kilometre Toronto waterfront from the Rouge to Etobicoke Creek. Have a look at Johanna's very comprehensive [deck](#).

Flood Protection, Villiers Island etc.

The biggest project on the waterfront is Port Lands Flood Protection project, under the management of Waterfront Toronto. The project will enable development of the Port Lands, which have been underutilized for a century or more because they are in the flood plain of the Don River.

The project involves digging a second river mouth of the Don River, creating a flood run-off area called the Don Greenway and building a new island, Villiers Island.

Construction started in 2018, and will be completed in 2024. Very soon, the water will be allowed to run gradually into the new river bed over about a three-week period. Then the “plugs” will be removed in January 2024, and the Don River will flow freely around Villiers island. I hope to paddle around the island that day or soon afterwards even if its cold!

The new red north Cherry Street bridge will open around the end of this year; the old Cherry Street lift bridge, now at the end of its operational life, will be removed. People have been able to drive, walk or bike over the yellow South Cherry Street Bridge since October 2022. The two-part Commissioners Road Bridge will open soon as well.

The Islands in Canoe Cove on the south shore of Villiers Island have been laid out, ready for the water to flow. There’s now water in the artificial wetland in the Don Greenway, but it is not connected to the lake or the river. A recent drone video of the winding new south channel of the Don River mouth is [here](#).

The project flood-protects 240 hectares of downtown land around the south Don and Port Lands, opening a whole new area of the city for parkland, residential and business uses.

The park land will be available soon, but the buildings will take years; build-out on Villiers Island won’t be completed until sometime in the 2040s. There’s been discussion lately about increasing the planned density on Villiers Island.

The original precinct plan for Villiers Island was adopted by City Council in 2017, before construction began. Since then, the pressure for more housing, including affordable housing, has continued to grow. Study of the services and transit among other things on Villiers Island showed that density can be increased by about 30%. Waterfront Toronto held a public consultation meeting on June 19, 2023 to get input on how that greater density might be handled.

We’ll likely see a new by-laws or precinct plan amendments allowing greater density on Villiers in 2024.

Love Park Opening

Love Park at Queens Quay West and York Street opened on June 23, 2023. Chris Glaisek of Waterfront Toronto brought his toy sailboat and sailed it on the pond. The park has become a popular feature of the downtown waterfront neighbourhood.

The park was formerly the site of the curved northbound exit ramp for the Gardiner eastbound traffic up York Street. Designed by the late Claude Cormier, who also designed Berczy Park, it has a big heart-shaped pool and statues of animals such as a raccoon, a bear, a fox and so on. There's a trellis that will eventually be covered with wisteria.

You can read all about it [here](#). Some of the big trees that grew up around the Gardiner ramp are still there, in particular the majestic catalpa tree now on an island in the pond. New trees have also been planted.

Rees Street Park Planned

An even larger park will be built a little further west along Queens Quay at Rees Street in what is now a parking lot by the Rees Street slip. A design was shown to the public at a meeting on January 10, 2023 which involved a lot of different features, and included a kind of artificial ridge high enough to screen the Gardiner from someone walking along Queens Quay. That design has been somewhat scaled back now as I understand it due to cost. Construction may begin in the Spring of 2026, but could get pushed back.

Big Duck Mania

A giant inflatable duck appeared on the waterfront on September 16 and 17, 2023 as part of the Waterfront Festival and was a big hit, drawing huge crowds even though it was set up on land in the parking lot at the Yonge Street slip, unlike its last visit in 2017 when it was floating on a barge.

Community Centre at One Yonge Opens

The new One Yonge Community Recreation Centre opened on November 4, 2023. It looks like its in the middle of a condo tower construction site, but it's up and running, and includes meeting rooms, a pool, basketball, pickleball and more. We hope to hold some future meetings there.

Harbourfront Skating Rink Closure

Harbourfront Centre unexpectedly announced that it was permanently closing its iconic and popular skating rink by the lake at a meeting of the York Quay Neighbourhood Association

(YQNA) on January 10, 2023. The rink was at the end of its operational life and there's no money to replace it. A new rink would apparently cost around \$13 million. Yet Harbourfront received a \$20 million federal grant two years earlier, directed in part at repair of the skating rink along with other capital assets.

The closure announcement got on social media, and the press picked it up. There was a lot of reaction. All three elected representatives, Kevin Vuong MP, Brian Glover MPP and Ausma Malik, Councillor for Ward 10, wrote to Harbourfront to express concerns about the closure of the rink, the waterfront's top winter attraction. Kevin Vuong started a federal petition to Parliament, and held a town square in February. Ausma Malik is trying to set up a Community Liaison Committee. Harbourfront has so far refused to meet with community groups or to have a CLC.

Harbourfront announced that it was replacing the rink with a plaza, but still hasn't released a visual rendering or plan for the new plaza. There were no consultations. Construction is on-going.

Harbourfront Centre is a federal entity; it gets most of its funding from the federal government as well as some city funding. It tries to attract donations. The Board meetings are private. Financials are not released. Details are scarce but it is clearly out of money. One problem is that Harbourfront gets some of its revenue from local parking lots that will soon become parks so that even more revenues will soon disappear.

In general, Harbourfront seems to be in decline. It doesn't seem to attract visitors. A lot of it is empty.

We're concerned that Harbourfront might just peter out, despite its central location, as Ontario Place did years ago, due to some combination of dropping attendance, a lack of funding and perhaps a lack of direction. On July 20, 2023 community groups wrote a joint [letter](#) to the federal government and the Mayor expressing concern and suggesting a task force or high level rethink of some kind. Should Harbourfront be more like say Granville Island in Vancouver? Should it be run by the City? Is there a way to make it vibrant again?

Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport: Should the City Renew?

The issue whether the island airport should exist for decades to come is now upon us, and will probably be decided in the next 18 months. We hope there will be a full discussion and investigation of all the options.

The issue will come to a head in the near future because of two timelines. First of all, long-expected draft federal regulations were published in the Canada Gazette, Part I on March 6, 2020 requiring Canada's busiest airports including BBTCA to install "runway end safety areas" (RESAs), run-off areas at either end of all runways so an aircraft can stop safely in case of emergency. In the case of the island airport, a RESAs must be built by early 2027. Two years

ago, Ports Toronto, the semi-autonomous federal agency that runs the airport, in effect put the airport up for sale; it estimated the cost of building the RESAs to potential investors at between \$50 and \$130 million.

Second, the Tripartite Agreement, essentially the agreement between the City, Ports Toronto and the federal government that governs the existence of the island airport, expires in 2033 with no provision for renewal. Ports Toronto needs to know if the airport will carry on past 2033 so that the large cost of RESAs can be amortized over decades.

It has therefore asked the City to amend the Tripartite Agreement to extend the existence of the airport past the TA's expiry in 2033. That means the island airport would continue to exist for perhaps a further 60 years (until 2083) instead of closing. So far as I know, Ports Toronto has not yet filed any formal documents in support of this request. We don't know what build-out and changes Ports Toronto will propose to comply with the RESA Regulations. We don't know yet if it will seek to expand the airport in other ways.

Toronto's major airport, Pearson International, is only about 20 kilometres from the island airport; the decision facing the City is really whether it needs two airports, one small, for several more generations.

While airports are normally a matter of federal jurisdiction, in this case the City, as part owner of the airport land and a party to the TA, gets to decide whether it wants one airport or two. Now is the time for the City to explore the benefits and costs of the various options. Closing the island airport in practice means that Porter Airlines would simply move to Pearson (where it's recently begun operating).

City Council has a once-in-lifetime chance to decide the future of 206 prime acres close to downtown in a stunning location.

A multi-department team at the City are preparing a report for the meeting of Executive Committee of City Council defining the issues and suggesting studies that they think are needed to give Council full information to make its decision. They originally thought the report would be ready to go before the Executive Committee at its December 5, 2023 meeting. That agenda item has now been postponed, possibly to the Executive Committee meeting on January 30, 2024 or more likely some later meeting.

City staff have estimated to me that Council's decision as to whether to agree to renew the airport for 60 more years could be made surprisingly soon - in the next eighteen months.

The outcome will affect our city and waterfront for generations to come.

With the help of a number of people, I wrote a [paper](#) called "Does Toronto Need Two Airports", released on October 24, 2023 outlining the apparent options, and posing questions that we believe the City should study as part of this process.

The City should invest significant resources in evaluating and investigating the benefits and downsides of the options.

The process must include robust public consultation. PT should of course participate in this process, but should not run it.

Scarborough Bluffs Project:

TRCA plans an 11-kilometre shoreline multi-use trail between Bluffer's Park and East Point Park. It is now 90% designed.

A paved trail will soon be built up the east side of Brimley Road South, the steep road that goes down to Bluffer's Park. It is now 90% designed. TRCA plans to commence construction in early 2024. Further information is [here](#).

Ashbridges Bay Landform

TRCA's Ashbridges Bay Treatment Plant Landform Project has created many acres of reclaimed land on the northeast shore of the Leslie Spit, at a cost of around \$96 million. Three large enclosures called cells have now been filled in, along with four T-shaped headlands to reduce erosion. It's hard to see unless you happen to be in a little boat over there on the east side of the Spit.

The project also involves creating two breakwaters: a groyne sticking south from Ashbridges Bay park, now complete, and a longer curved breakwater protecting the Coatsworth Cut slightly to the west, on which construction will continue through to 2024. TRCA will create fish habitat there.

The new landfill will soon be the site of a new high-rate treatment plant. There may one day be parkland, trails and so on after soil is laid down.

The new treatment plant will be part of an enormous multi-decade project to treat Toronto's sewage, the Don River and Central Waterfront (DR&CW) Wet Weather Flow System. Lou di Geronimo of Toronto Water gave a great [talk](#) about it on January 25, 2022 in our Speaker Series. The huge project will capture wastewater from combined sewers across the city for treatment before it is discharged into the depths of Lake Ontario. That will virtually eliminate all discharge into the Don River, Taylor-Massey Creek and Toronto Harbour, and make the lake a lot cleaner.

The project will consist of an integrated system of 22km of tunnels, including tunnels along the downtown waterfront and Taylor Creek. Construction will carry on well into the late 2030s.

Ontario Place Battle

It's well known that the Ontario government has agreed to a long-term lease of the West Island at Ontario Place to Austria-based Therme Group to build a massive spa. The government also plans to move the Ontario Science Centre to Ontario Place in 2025, and also to build an underground parking facility at public expense.

The plan has led to considerable controversy and opposition, in particular by our off-shoot group, Ontario Place for All. Two years ago, when the Therme plan was first announced, Waterfront for All sent a [submission](#) suggesting that the tri-government agency Waterfront Toronto be given the job of running a consensus-driven process to develop a plan for the revitalization of Ontario Place *before* granting any long-term leaseholds.

The government's lease with Therme and details of the deal signed in 2022 have still not been made public.

The acting attorney general, in a report released on December 6, 2023, revealed that the lease agreement binds the government to provide thousands of dedicated parking spaces, or else face financial penalty. The cost of the underground parking necessary to do this is estimated by the Ontario government at \$307 million. The auditor general's report found that the government had done an incomplete comparison of the costs of moving the Science Centre to the Ontario Place grounds.

An updated development application was submitted by the provincial government to the City in August. It slightly reduced the projected size of the spa, and increased the size of the parkland. The government has earmarked \$650 million for infrastructure upgrades across the Ontario grounds.

Mayor Olivia Chow announced a deal with Premier Ford on November 27, 2023 that will see the City approve the province's plans for Ontario Place, while the Province will take over management of the Gardiner and the Don Valley Parkway. Toronto has a \$1.5 billion budget hole, and little or no power to stop the provincial government's plans at Ontario Place.

The Ford government has now tabled legislation giving itself more powers to redevelop Ontario Place. It's also taking steps to expropriate certain city land along the lake by the Ontario Place site.

The Province seems now to be considering moving some of the spa parking to the CNE grounds. That will be controversial, and likely opposed by at least one of our component member groups, the West End Community Council which will object to the great potential of the CNE grounds being wasted as a parking lot for a spa at Ontario Place.

Quayside

Many people remember that Google/Sidewalk Labs was involved in a proposal to develop this 12 acre L-shaped site at the foot of Parliament, but pulled out in May 2020.

Waterfront Toronto is now well-along with a plan for a mixed-use community still called Quayside in the Parliament Slip, involving five development blocks, a large cultural attraction of some kind on the water (details undecided as yet), a park beside it called Silo Park, and a school. Quayside will include a 2 acre site called the Community Forest as well as Canada's largest timber building. The structures will be built by Dream Unlimited and Great Gulf Group, together known as Quayside Impact.

Chris Glaisek of Waterfront Toronto gave us an update recently when he spoke in our Speaker Series on November 7, 2023. More information is available [here](#).

Nearby will be a Water's Edge Promenade which will extend along the water from around Sugar Beach to the Parliament Quay. It's already under construction; the promenade supports can be seen from a kayak.

Western Beaches Public Realm Plan:

The City's Waterfront Secretariat wants to update the Western Waterfront Master Plan of 2009 which dealt with the roads, parks and beaches along Humber Bay west of Ontario Place to the Humber River.

The public can comment on what they like or don't like about the area via an automated on-line survey called the Toronto Western Beaches Public Life Study accessible [here](#), over about a two month period ending tomorrow Wednesday, December 13, 2023. So if you want to comment, do it right away!

There is an active group on Humber Bay called the West End Beaches Association (WEBSA), a group dedicated to protecting community water-based recreational and sport opportunities in the Western Beaches. It consists mainly of members of the Boulevard Club, the Argonaut Rowing Club, the Sunnyside Paddling Club, and the Toronto Sailing and Canoe Club. They kindly invited to a WEBSA meeting at the Argonaut Rowing Club on November 25, 2023 which was well-attended. There was a lot of concern in particular about the poor condition of the breakwater around Humber Bay, mostly ancient and now falling apart. WEBSA also has a [proposal](#) for a new breakwater and artificial islands near the Humber River, reflecting the vision of Walter Kehm who spoke in our Speaker Series on May 11, 2021 (a recording is [here](#).)

Staff will prepare an updated plan and report back to the Infrastructure and Environment Committee of City Council in 2024.

Cabana Pool Bar Nightclub Liquor License Litigation

Some years ago, the owners of the existing Rebel nightclub and associated outdoor patio Cabana Pool Bar, at Unwin Street on the eastern end of Toronto Harbour, applied for a new liquor license through a subsidiary shell corporation, Powerhouse. The proposed license would have allowed more people, longer hours and fewer restrictions on amplified music on the outdoor patio. This was opposed by the City, the Islanders and one of our members associations York Quay Neighbourhood Association (YQNA), which I represented at the hearing and subsequent appeals.

After a 17-day hearing, the License Appeal Board (LAT), in August 2018 allowed the new liquor license, but with conditions much worse for Cabana Pool Bar than the license it was already operating under: amplified music on the outdoor patio was prohibited. The nightclub appealed, but the appeal was dismissed with lengthy reasons by the Divisional Court on June 14, 2021. The unanimous Divisional Court's decision is [here](#). The nightclub sought leave to appeal further to the Ontario Court of Appeal but was denied leave on November 16, 2021.

The Alcohol and Gaming Commission is now seeking an order that the existing license be changed to reflect the result of that litigation against the Powerhouse subsidiary, namely amplified music would be prohibited on the patio. There has been a 17-day hearing which concluded today with oral argument (I wasn't involved this time). There will be a decision in due course.

Marine Use Study

Waterfront Toronto released a Marine Use Strategy Final [Report](#) in March 2021, an update of an earlier 2006 study dealing with what docks, promenades and infrastructure are necessary on Toronto Harbour, where boats should be moored, how the harbour should be managed, and what kinds of marine transportation such as water taxis, ferries and the like are needed.

Waterfront Toronto is now updating that study, this time looking specifically at water taxis and sea buses.

Sea buses don't exist now on the harbour; they are a new idea. Might they provide a kind of public transit on the water that would allow people to get from one part of the harbour to another by boat, as revitalization creates more destinations?

There was a public consultation on November 6, 2023 which I attended. There was a lot of concern about too many power boats in general on the water, going too fast. Another public consultation meeting will take place at a time yet to be determined.

Exhibition Place Master Planning Process:

A master planning process was on-going at Exhibition Place at the urging of various neighbourhood groups which make up the West Side Community Council, one of our member organizations. Phase 1, dealing mostly with the vintage buildings, was completed in 2020; other phases were to consider the best use of the Exhibition Place grounds.

All that has now been put on hold by dramatic announcements from the Conservative government: the new Ontario Line will terminate at Exhibition Grounds and, more recently, by a proposal from the City that the Therme spa be built at Exhibition Place instead of Ontario Place. That looks unlikely now because Mayor Chow has said the City won't oppose the provincial government's spa plan at Ontario Place.

Possibly, some of the controversial parking for the spa could end up at Exhibition Place on the north side of Lakeshore Boulevard instead of, or in addition to, parking on the south shore, saving or reducing the high cost of underground parking.

Bathurst Quay Neighbourhood Plan:

This involves beautifying the area around the malting towers at the Western Gap, creating gardens and public spaces for events and performances.

Bryan Bowen of Toronto Parks, who has been running the project since construction began in 2019, took me for a great tour on December 4, 2023 about a week ago. It was great! We donned hard hats and climbed up on to the top of the malting towers, walked around on the scaffolding, and also went inside the malting towers (very spooky).

The area will be known as Bathurst Quay Common. Construction is on-schedule to open in September 2024.

The malting towers were built partly around 1928 and partly around 1944, to store and process barley brought by freighters. They have been renovated and cleaned up. Lighting effects will be projected on them. Inside will be an art gallery run by Ontario College of Art University.

There will be lots of trees, landscaping and promenades. You'll be able to walk between the north and south malting towers. West of the towers will be a stunning outdoor event plaza. The nearby heritage art deco Corleck Building, formerly the offices of Canada Malting, will house the cultural and community offices of the Canada Ireland Foundation, as well as a performance space, a café and a rooftop bar.

New Facilities for Kayaks, Canoes

Waterfront for All raised concerns with the City about the lack of facilities for paddling on the Waterfront. As a result of an RFP process, five operators renting out canoes, kayaks and stand-up paddle boards opened in the summer of 2021. They include Toronto Island SUP beside the Algonquin Bridge on Toronto Island, and Toronto SUP and Kayak at the east end of Cherry Beach, two SUP rental operations at the Beaches and one along Humber Bay. Next summer will be their third year of operation, and the last year of their contracts, so presumably Parks will embark on some kind of renewal process. I think it is clear that the experiment has been a success.

The demand for canoe and kayak storage continues to grow. Paddler efforts to negotiate with Parks or other entity for some kind of storage facility for personally-owned kayaks, canoes, outrigger canoes, and dragon boats are continuing.

We are encouraged that Ports Toronto in 2024 will open a new rowing building north of the Outer Harbour Marina, mostly for use of boys from Upper Canada College, built with a generous donation from Don Lindsay, long-time former CEO of Teck Resources, a rowing cox in his days at UCC. Perhaps a similar donor will appear to help the paddling community.

See a beta version of an [Annotated Paddling Map of Toronto](#) on our website. We'll be expanding and developing it.

We Need More Safety Ladders!

We need more safety ladders all around the harbour. The seawall is often six or eight feet high, impossible to climb in the absence of a ladder. For much of the year the water is cold. If someone falls in, it could be a death sentence. As more people are around Toronto Harbour, more safety ladders are essential. Yet there are none in many places. Where safety ladders exist, they are often in such poor repair as to be useless.