

David's Substack

Doug Ford wants to put jets over Toronto's harbour.

Here's why that should alarm you.

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I am on the water before most of Toronto is awake. As a member of the Hanlan Boat Club, I row in the outer harbour most mornings, well before the ferries run. At that hour the water is quiet, the city skyline catches the early light, and the harbour belongs to rowers, cyclists, beavers, and the occasional great blue heron. It is one of the genuinely beautiful things about living in this city.

Premier Ford wants to end that.

His plan to extend the runways at Billy Bishop Airport and introduce jet aircraft to the inner harbour has received less attention than it deserves, perhaps because it has been advanced without public hearings, without an environmental assessment, and without any disclosed evidence that it is needed or wanted. That secrecy is itself worth noting. When a government is confident a plan is good for people, it tends to explain itself.

I am a professor of epidemiology at the University of Toronto's Dalla Lana School of Public Health, and I want to explain what the public health evidence actually says, because Premier Ford has not.

Jet exhaust is not a minor nuisance. It is a well-characterized source of ultrafine particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, and volatile organic compounds, exposures with documented links to cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, and developmental harm in children. These are not theoretical risks. They are the reasons we do not, as a matter of policy, site major jet traffic over densely populated urban neighbourhoods without rigorous environmental review.

Downtown Toronto is home to roughly 300,000 people. The waterfront they live on and visit is among the most intensively used urban shorelines in North America.

The Premier has described the proposed aircraft as “quiet jets.” That claim has not been substantiated with any data made available for public scrutiny. As someone who teaches epidemiological methods for a living, I would observe that an unsupported assertion from a government that has declined to hold public hearings is not evidence. It is a talking point.

Consider what that waterfront actually contains. On any given afternoon, Centreville amusement park on Centre Island is filled with children. The waterfront trail is a continuous stream of walkers, runners, and cyclists from Mississauga to Scarborough. The harbour itself is busy with sailors, kayakers, paddleboarders, and rowers. All of them would find themselves beneath the extended approach and departure corridors of jets whose exhaust, noise, and wake turbulence do not stop at the runway’s edge.

And then there is the larger pattern, which Torontonians (and indeed, Canadians) should find troubling. Premier Ford demolished the Ontario Science Centre, a beloved public institution built over generations with public money. He gutted Ontario Place. Both decisions were made without genuine public consultation, and both stripped the city of assets that belonged to its people. The island airport expansion is the same instinct applied to the waterfront, the single greatest civic reclamation project in the city’s history.

That reclamation was not cheap, and it was not Ford’s alone to undo. Federal and municipal governments have invested for decades in transforming what was an industrial wasteland into the living, breathing waterfront that Torontonians now cherish. The Port Lands redevelopment alone is one of the most ambitious urban renewal projects in the world. The harbour that borders it, the parks, the trails, the clubs, the beaches: these are the return on that investment. Premier Ford is proposing to devalue them unilaterally, and to do so in a way that

concentrates the harm on the people least able to avoid it, those who live there, work there, and bring their children there.

There is a federal angle here that has not received sufficient attention. The approvals required to expand Billy Bishop and introduce jet service are not entirely within Queen's Park's power to grant. The federal government has jurisdiction over navigable waters, airspace, and environmental assessment. Environment Minister Julie Dabrusin, who represents a Toronto riding, has both the authority and the responsibility to demand a transparent, rigorous review before this proceeds. So far, the federal response has been muted, and that silence is hard to understand given the scale of what is being proposed.

I do not oppose Billy Bishop Airport. The turboprop planes that currently use it are part of the harbour's character. What I oppose is the introduction of jet traffic into downtown Toronto's airspace without evidence, without process, and without the consent of the people who will live with the consequences.

Those people are not a small constituency. They are the hundreds of thousands of Torontonians who have made the waterfront part of their lives, drawn there by decades of investment and renewal. They deserve to be asked. So far, no one has bothered to ask them.

The University-Rosedale by-election on April 13 offers an early test of whether federal Liberals are willing to stand up to Premier Ford on this issue. The riding sits directly in the path of what Ford is proposing. Voters there should ask the candidates plainly: will you use federal authority to demand an environmental review before a single runway is extended? The answer will tell us a great deal about whether Ottawa is serious about protecting what Torontonians have spent a generation building.