

Friends of the Golden Horseshoe

January 10, 2023

Dear Mayor Tory and Members of Council,

Subject: Say “No” to current proposal to redevelop Ontario Place

The Friends of the Golden Horseshoe is a broad-based coalition which has come together to promote leadership at the provincial and municipal levels to support a livable, affordable, sustainable city and region. Our communities should have good local jobs, more housing and transportation choices, clean and protected water resources and natural systems and sustainable farmland, together with a robust, accessible public realm and park system — including a safeguarded Greenbelt.

While our focus is regional, we are deeply concerned about the current plans for Ontario Place.

The proposal before you for a massive indoor waterpark and a 2,000-car garage by the Austrian company, Therme, is environmentally regressive. It would seriously undermine the efforts we are making as a city and region toward a more sustainable, climate-ready and inclusive future for our growing population.

A false premise

The assertion that Ontario Place is a “ruin” that requires massive private sector redevelopment that led to this proposal is wrong and it is spurious. This proposed development would eviscerate what is already a place of enormous heritage and cultural value — part of our city’s, region’s and province’s legacy — would privatize actively used public land and would require half a billion dollars of scarce public money to do so.

Ontario Place opened in 1971 with the intention of democratizing access to Toronto’s waterfront and celebrating Ontario. According to the province’s own Statement of Cultural Heritage Value in 2013:

“Ontario Place, a cultural heritage landscape, remains a rare and intact Modernist expression of integrated architecture, engineering and landscape that honours and incorporates the natural setting of Lake Ontario. It was a remarkable and ambitious achievement of late twentieth century architecture, and holds an enduring influence in Toronto, the province and internationally.”

Significantly, and unfortunately, not surprisingly, the province removed that statement from its website in 2019. In 2020, in response to international concerns, Ontario Place was put on the World Monuments Fund Watch list for endangered cultural heritage assets.

The need for public green space

As the population of the Toronto and the Greater Golden Horseshoe increases rapidly, more people are moving into transit supportive, more affordable, multi-residential housing forms where they rely on public open spaces and parks for livability — including physical and mental health/wellbeing. This makes it more critical than ever to maintain and enhance our existing public realm and, importantly, increase parkland and accessible public open space — not give it away to private interests at taxpayers' cost. The need for public space has been dramatically underscored and heightened during the pandemic, as significantly more people than ever are accessing our open spaces and parks. Meeting this need, Ontario Place had more than 1.4-million visitors by 2018, not counting the Budweiser Stage and Echo Beach.

This proposal takes us backwards. From the province's own highly misleading consultation materials most of the "publicly accessible land" shown is paved parking lot and event space or, around the Therme proposal, is currently under water.

Ontario Place is the result of a brilliant collaboration between renowned designers, architect Eberhard Zeidler and landscape architect Michael Hough. They described it as a waterfront park and it is a valuable one. It functions today as the Globe and Mail's architectural critic Alex Bozicovic has pointed out,

... as essential greenspace, a cultural venue, hosting festivals, live music, picnics and sports. In 2017, the province rebuilt part of the East Island with the beautiful Trillium Park; there are places to walk, roll climb and linger beneath copses of indigenous trees. The Cinesphere, until this fall, was showing movies in Imax. And the West Island is a place for recreation and relaxation. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, I've visited the site regularly to walk, cycle and even swim. The pebble beach on the southwest shore has some of the cleanest water in Toronto. It is glorious. It is often crowded.

Anti-democratic lack of transparency

The provincial consultation regarding the future of Ontario Place has been seriously flawed. It began with the predetermination that the majority of the site would be given over to the private sector. It was not informed by any master plan for Ontario Place or the broader waterfront in its vicinity, nor did it seek input on the long-term vision of Ontario Place as a publicly accessible, affordable place in keeping with its origins, violating the *Ontario Heritage Act* by signing a lease with Therme before completing the Strategic Conservation Plan required to protect provincial heritage properties.

This lack of meaningful, sincere consultation has become a hallmark of the current provincial government which has systemically revised many laws to limit both citizen and municipal input and participation. The government's current proposal and approach to Ontario Place exists

behind a wall of non-disclosure agreements. It is the epitome of catering to the needs of the private sector — abysmally tone-deaf on the needs of current and future residents of Toronto and the broader Golden Horseshoe. It is not in the public interest to privatize and cut off the invaluable public space that Ontario Place currently provides.

Incomprehensible misuse of scarce public resources

The move to privatize public assets, and particularly public space, flies in the face of international best practices, which recognize the enormous social, environmental and economic value of well-designed public parks and open spaces in world cities. In the case of the Therme proposal, the proposed facility would have a high admission price, making it inaccessible to many Ontario families and visitors. Further, we have now learned that the public would be on the hook for at least \$100 million for site preparation and for funding a one-million-square-foot, five-storey underground garage for 2,118 cars. According to industry standards, this could cost as much as \$450 million — a cost the Ford government apparently intends to foist on Toronto and Ontario taxpayers. To make matters worse, the terms of the lease, amount of rent and length, are not being made public. In the absence of transparent public information, one can only assume that it is likely that whatever Therme is paying to lease its site cannot possibly cover the public's costs.

Disfiguring the Toronto Waterfront

The Therme project is simply the wrong project in the wrong place. Where they exist in Eastern Europe these Therme spas are generally in ex-urban areas surrounded by the large surface parking lots they require.

On the West Island in Ontario Place, it is grotesquely out of scale, a 13-storey structure nearly as tall as the stadium at BMO Field, occupying the space of seven football fields, almost four hectares of land. It would require the removal of 850 trees that have been growing on the West Island for half a century as well as the levelling of the Michael Hough sculpted landforms that form an essential part of its architectural value. It would dwarf the heritage structures, the pods and the Cinesphere it crowds out; obliterate views of the lake and the city. It would be surrounded by gates and security guards and service access, hardly the gossamer “greenhouse” that is being disingenuously portrayed in carefully cropped renderings.

On the ground, a decades-in-the-making initiative to achieve a generous and continuously accessible public water's edge seamlessly linking Humber Bay to the Western Beaches to the Inner Harbour and the Port lands would be obstructed by the immense blockage this proposal on the West Island of Ontario Place would form. For private gain, the Therme project would push pedestrians and cyclists into a narrow strip skirting the spa structure.

A time to say NO

Rarely has such determined public resistance been seen across the board. In growing numbers, the people of Toronto, the Greater Golden Horseshoe and throughout the province who have an attachment to Ontario Place, have voiced their distress and alarm, through organizations

such as Waterfront for All and Ontario Place for All along with the World Monuments Fund and the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, among many others.

Mayor John Tory, we hold you to your word when in 2012, you served as Chair of the Ontario Place Revitalization Panel. At that time, you announced your commitment to “a new direction that will bring Ontario Place into the 21st century and over time create a new **iconic public park** that celebrates its connection to the waterfront of Lake Ontario.”

The Therme proposal is not that. A meaningful review of the scheme cannot be done by parsing the issues into silos, such as heritage, public realm, and transportation as separate issues. That would force staff and citizens to comment narrowly only those pieces — despite the fact that most people already do not want the whole thing in the first place. The problem is with the totality. It is the wrong scheme.

This is a critical moment in the life of the city and the region. We call upon you Mayor, and City Councillors to take a stand, representing how citizens feel. We call on you to reject this ill-conceived proposal and defend the city's interests, no matter what the province seeks to impose on Toronto and the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

What are we saying yes to is Ontario Place as a 21st Century Park

We have an extraordinary opportunity to turn Ontario Place into a leading international example of the 21st century park Mayor Tory alluded to in 2012. It can be integrated with Exhibition Place and the built and landscape heritage on the site can — and should — be creatively adapted and reused, not given away and chained off for only the wealthy.

Toronto has a strong track record and we should build on it, not wreck it with this ill-considered scheme. Since the creation of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust in 1992 we have been on a trajectory opening up the Toronto waterfront based on three core principles “Clean, Green and Accessible.” To fulfill this mandate, we have called upon the expertise of Waterfront Toronto, now one of the pre-eminent waterfront agencies in the world with an established 21-year record of success and public trust. Ontario Place falls within its designated territory and Waterfront Toronto has already participated in creation of the widely acclaimed Trillium Park on the East Island.

The public funds to be spent on the Therme proposal could be put to much better use by building on this precedent. The province has retained landscape architects to develop a continuation of Trillium Park for the East Island and the mainland, building on the Michael Hough legacy, restoring ecological balance and providing social space and amenities. This along with the restoration and adaptive re-use of the Cinesphere and Pods, is the way to move forward.

Waterfront Toronto, supported equally by the federal, provincial, and municipal governments, should be asked to prepare a new comprehensive master plan for Ontario Place together with the adjacent city-owned Exhibition Place as they have done in the Port Lands on the east side of

downtown. Put the focus on culture and nature, inspired by the original vision for Ontario Place.

But first we have to say unequivocally **NO** to the current proposal and regroup.

Ontario Place is a critical part of an emerging public realm on the waterfront. This consolidated “Lakefront Park” should be a grand new waterfront gathering place and major tourist draw, offering an expanded array of activities, including swimming, fishing, skating, major annual events, theatres, marinas, restaurants and cafes and heritage sites. Improved regional and city transit and local shuttles and trail connections would improve accessibility and encourage active transportation. Ontario Place’s attractive landscapes would be preserved as part of a freely accessible “Lakefront Park” that would extend like an emerald arm across the waterfront.

Don’t let private interests and money crush the dream for Ontario Place. It’s a powerful showplace for the city, the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the province — and the public.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Crombie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "C".

David Crombie
Chair, Friends of the Golden Horseshoe