

Rethinking the Island Airport as urban resort

Inside Toronto

JOHN
BARBER



The next time you visit the dock of the little ferry boat that jumps the Western Gap at the foot of Bathurst Street, offering the quickest and easiest passage to the Toronto Islands, take a look at a sign posted there. Use fresh eyes.

No Access to Island Beaches, it says.

"That really sums it up," says Allan Sparrow, the reform-era city councillor who has made his comeback in the new century as the leader of a surprisingly effective campaign to close the Island Airport.

What he means is that fresh eyes could only be amazed to see how Toronto neglects, even suppresses, its greatest natural assets — in this case blocking access to the largest park in the central district, chopping 80 hectares off its flank and closing one kilometre of beautiful sand beach in order to continue losing millions of dollars a year operating a third-rate airstrip that, even its managers agree, is obsolete.

But fresh eyes need help. Torontonians are so accustomed to seeing the airport as permanent that it is hard for us to reimagine the site in its original form, as a popular, year-round resort easily accessible from the mainland. We have complacently accepted the fact that the central city's most precious natural environment will always be difficult to visit and essentially invisible eight months a

year.

That is why Mr. Sparrow and his group, Community AIR, has gathered a team of architects and planners to sketch a vision of what the airport site might look like if it were ever developed in accordance with its current zoning — as public open space. (The Island Airport, which was never designed to be permanent, is a "legal non-conforming land use," according to Mr. Sparrow.)

The surprising thing about this exercise is that it has never been done before. Even the Robert Fung task force, charged with reimagining the entire waterfront, left the island alone.

In an effort to demonstrate substantial positive benefits of closing the airport, the Community AIR team begins by taking down the prison-camp barbed wire that prevents public access to the northern kilometre of Hanlan's Beach. The dunes that once bordered the beach, as well as the wetlands behind them, should be restored, according to Mr. Sparrow, creating a system of boardwalks like those at Presqu'île Provincial Park to cross the marshes.

But the original park was more than simply natural, and Community AIR wants to recreate its late 19th-century character by including small-scale buildings and attractions, including modest hotels.

The team envisions something far more dramatic for the prominent point of land that was created by extending the main runway eastward into Toronto Bay, and is calling for the row of hangars that currently lines the island shore of the Western Gap to be recycled for more animated public uses.

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The details of the plan are less important at this stage than the fact of its existence, which provides the city with a crucial positive vision for this precious empty quarter of the waterfront.

And the timing is perfect, with city council finally scheduled to face the big choice next month: Either close the airport or permit a dramatic expansion. All sides agree that the status quo is untenable.

Community AIR is not placing all its faith in pretty pictures, however. It has commissioned a study to show that the economic benefits of an expanded park far outweigh the benefits of an airport (including a larger, profitable version of the facility, which would suppress property values throughout the central waterfront).

The group is also encouraging regional public health authorities to recommend against an expansion and is threatening to sue any government that dares to amend the protective tripartite agreement that currently prohibits expansion.

Legally and politically, Community AIR appears to be assembling a strong campaign. But the strongest case is purely imaginative. If Torontonians can begin to imagine this place as what it once was — a beautiful, popular island resort steps away from the downtown mainland — they will clearly reject its current use.

jbarber@globeandmail.ca