



WATERFRONTToronto

Lower Don Lands Backgrounder

The Lower Don Lands is a 125-hectare (308-acre) area that runs from East Bayfront (the Parliament Street Slip) east to the Don Roadway and from West Don Lands (the rail corridor) south to the Shipping Channel.

Regeneration and development of the Lower Don Lands has been hindered by a number of factors, including flood risk, isolation from the rest of the city, soil and groundwater contamination and insufficient infrastructure. The Lower Don Lands plans address and overcome all of these factors, and will guide and transform this post-industrial area into a sought-after destination to live, work and play based on design excellence, ecology and economic sustainability.

The award winning vision addresses the issue of Don River flooding, including the potential of catastrophic flooding, and provides room for naturalization by reorganizing the land use and infrastructure pattern to give the river space for a more organic and efficient river flow that also meets the technical demands of flood protection.

The naturalization and shifting of the mouth of the Don River is the centerpiece of the plans for the Lower Don Lands. The plans will allow the current channelization of the river mouth to be reimaged as an urban canal neighbourhood.

History

The area is located on what was once the largest natural wetland on the Great Lakes. The Asbridges Bay Marsh was created by the lower Don River as it emptied into Toronto's inner harbour.

The landscape in the Lower Don Lands was dramatically altered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Don River and the marsh it created posed many problems for the adjacent settlement of York and starting in 1870 a series of breakwaters, channels and other man-made structures were created to manage the area. Most failed or caused additional problems and in the 1910s plans were developed to change the area permanently.

In 1912, the Board of the Toronto Harbour Commission completed a plan for transforming Asbridges Bay Marsh into a massive new industrial district with waterfront parks and summer homes.

The mouth of the Don River was redirected into the concrete-lined Keating Channel in 1914 and infilling of the surrounding wetlands began. With each hectare of infill the risk of flooding increased.

By 1922, more than 200 hectares (500 acres) of land had been created on the former marsh, with another 200 hectares soon to follow. These lands were quickly occupied by industry and plans for a major waterfront park and adjoining cottage community were never realized.

After the Gardiner Expressway was built in the 1950s, the mouth of the Don River became lost amidst a tangle of off-ramps, bridges and abutments. Access to the river was cut off.

Over the past several decades, public calls for the naturalization of the mouth of the Don River have grown steadily stronger.

Revitalizing the Lower Don Lands

The transformation of the Lower Don Lands is unique in size, scope and complexity. Ecology is the engine of this transformation. Through a radical repositioning of natural systems, transportation networks and urban environments the Lower Don Lands will become a 21st century urban estuary.

Waterfront Toronto's plans transform the largely underutilized industrial area into a global model for sustainable city building. Toronto, Lake Ontario and the Don River will interact in a dynamic and balanced relationship at the shores of the largest freshwater system in the world, enhancing the habitat corridor between Lake Ontario and the Upper Don Watershed. The plans propose a diversity of complementary ecosystems, including additional open water, floodplain wetlands, wet prairies, and native forests.

The plans reconfigure the Don River's mouth from its current location at the Keating Channel near the Don Roadway south to Lake Ontario. The Keating Channel is left intact.

The river will be re-routed through the middle of the Lower Don Lands and will become the main outlet of a riverine system, with secondary river outfalls at the Shipping Channel and the current Keating Channel. By diversifying the management of the flows, the impact of the river is made softer at its edges and soils, habitat, and biodiversity are restored.

This vision solves the Don River flood risk and provides room for naturalization by reorganizing the land use and infrastructure patterns to give the river space for a more organic and efficient flow.

New vibrant mixed-use communities will be created around the new mouth of the Don River. A large riverfront park will become the heart of the new neighbourhoods.

The Lower Don Lands plans preserve the Keating Channel as an urban artifact and neighbourhood amenity, featuring public parks and promenades along its edge.

The Keating Channel Neighbourhood

The Keating Channel neighbourhood is the first precinct being planned for the area. The neighbourhood runs from East Bayfront in the west to the Don River in the east, and from the West Don Lands south to Villiers Street.

The draft Keating Channel precinct plan consists of 25 blocks that will feature a variety of built-forms that support a passive design approach to sustainable development.

The 1,100-metre long and 36-metre wide Keating Channel anchors the neighbourhood to the north and south, and provides a unique waterfront setting. The draft precinct plan envisions a transformed Channel, one that is lined with public space and traversed by four new bridges for vehicles, transit, cyclists, and pedestrians. The draft plan envisions approximately 4,000 new residential units.

Sustainable Design

Waterfront Toronto is employing global best practices and developing made-in-Toronto solutions that will set our city apart as a model of sustainability for cities across Canada and around the world.

In May 2009, the Lower Don Lands project was selected as one of 16 founding projects of the Climate Positive Development Program - a project of U.S. President Bill Clinton's Climate Initiative and the U.S. Green Building Council - to demonstrate sustainable urban growth models and support large urban developments in achieving zero carbon emissions.

Waterfront Toronto and the other participating partners will seek to reduce the net greenhouse gas emissions of their projects to below zero by working collaboratively in implementing economically viable innovations in construction, generation of clean energy, and innovative approaches to waste management, water management and transportation.

Sun and wind movement studies have been used to shape the orientation of buildings and street blocks in the Keating Channel neighbourhood. This will not only further the development of an energy efficient indoor building climate but will also provide for a more comfortable experience in the public realm by maximizing natural light and the natural cooling effects of summer breezes and shade, while offering protection from winter winds.

The plans also propose harvesting water from building rooftops to feed the wetlands and the river.

Master Planning and Public Consultation

In February 2007, Waterfront Toronto launched an International Design Competition to produce a concept that would provide the unifying vision for merging the natural and urban fabric into a green, integrated and sustainable community and provide common ground for the numerous environmental assessments (EAs) required for the area. In

May 2007, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Inc. (MVVA) “Port Lands Estuary” was announced as the winning design.

The Lower Don Lands planning initiative began with an Issues Identification Study to determine critical programs and phasing criteria. Study results were used to help Waterfront Toronto and the MVVA team develop a Framework Planning Process to guide effective planning of the project. This process allowed the team to work on the design of the site as a whole, and to be able to integrate the project’s numerous concurrent EAs, with the design of the Precinct Plan for the Keating Channel neighbourhood.

Waterfront Toronto recognizes the importance of engaging stakeholders and the public by providing multiple and ongoing opportunities for input and feedback throughout the EA process.

As with all waterfront planning initiatives, public consultation has been and will continue to be a key component of Lower Don Lands planning. The planning process has included numerous stakeholders and public meetings as well as a number of workshop sessions.

In addition to the Don Greenway Workshop and the “Rise of the New Don” integrated public workshop, Waterfront Toronto has held three public meetings for the Lower Don Lands EA process.

The Lower Don Lands consultation included the following elements:

Public Forums –provide opportunities for the public to give feedback and comments on study components, results, and ideas as they developed over the course of the study. The format included: panel displays, presentations and small table discussions/workstations on key questions.

First Nations – were contacted at the outset to determine their interest in participating during the EA. First Nations were contacted and asked for feedback during each round of public forums.

Stakeholder Workshops/Face-to-Face Meetings –have been convened to seek input from stakeholders on key issues and opportunities during the process. The Project Team attends meetings when invited by specific organizations, as appropriate.

Stakeholder Advisory Committee – was established at the outset of the EA, and provided an ongoing forum for feedback, guidance and advice at key points during the process.

Technical Advisory Committee – consisting of government and agency representatives was established to provide input at various milestones during the EA.

As the plans move forward Waterfront Toronto will provide additional opportunities for public and stakeholder input and consultation.