

( Executive Summary )

# The Casa Loma Connection



REPORT OF THE CASA LOMA ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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# A Small History of Toronto's Biggest House

In 1911, one of the Canada's most important industrialists, Sir Henry Pellatt, hired one of Canada's most important architects, Edward J. Lennox, to build him a house. Pellatt had made a fortune by investing in the Canadian Pacific Railway, and bringing electricity to Toronto from Niagara Falls. Lennox, the son of immigrants from Ireland, had built the Niagara Falls powerhouse, Toronto's magnificent City Hall, the West Wing at Queen's Park, and many significant churches. By 1914, with three hundred men and \$3.5 million, they had erected Casa Loma, a vast Gothic confection on a five-acre estate with a commanding view of Toronto (just around the corner from Lennox's house). Casa Loma was conceived as a bridge between European tradition and North American innovation, between the archaic and the modern. Its Norman and Scottish towers, its Elizabethan style plaster, its Romanesque Great Hall, evoked the past. Its conveniences – electric lighting, heating and cooling systems, telephones, central vacuum and an elevator – invoked the future. Even the exterior was both cutting edge and ancient: it was built of a man-made product called Roman Stone. Casa Loma's duality made it the ultimate Edwardian house.

But times change. In 1924, Pellatt's fortune collapsed. Casa Loma became the property of the City of Toronto in lieu of payment of taxes. By 1937, when the Kiwanis Club shouldered the task of trying to make something of Casa Loma, it had stood empty for 12 years. There were no other bidders when Kiwanis licensed its use from the City as a vehicle to raise money. Though Casa Loma was then still a modern house, Kiwanis marketed it to tourists as a medieval castle in a modern city. As the license was renegotiated and renewed at regular intervals, Kiwanis began to rent Casa Loma's rooms for special events, catering and as film locations, earning revenue both for the City and for Kiwanis Club charities.

Years went by. Casa Loma, with its once ultramodern infrastructure was designated historically significant under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1987. Though it is the City-owned property that could best tell the story of Toronto's Edwardian transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, its grand reception rooms remained mostly empty so they could be rented out efficiently. Torontonians lost interest: more than 85% of visitors came from outside the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), mostly the US. While the City was responsible for the exterior infrastructure, and Kiwanis for the interior, both deteriorated.





**Above:** Restored rooms in Casa Loma **Below:** Casa Loma circa 1914-1923 viewed from the northwest



## The Crisis

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In 1997, City staff discovered the Roman Stone was crumbling. Casa Loma needed urgent exterior repairs to keep its visitors safe. In 2002, the City's application to SuperBuild failed in part, City staff were told, due to lack of community support. Nevertheless, the City embarked on a seven-year \$20 million exterior restoration program. The \$1 million a year the City earns from Kiwanis Club's efforts was redirected to this project, but more was needed: Casa Loma became a drain on the City's capital budget. In 2003 the SARS crisis severely curtailed Toronto tourism. The 60% drop in attendance at the height of the outbreak forced Kiwanis to postpone licence payments owed to the City and severely reduced its earnings for charities. Casa Loma became a financial pressure for both Kiwanis and the City. While attendance slowly recovered, in 2005 the Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma realized only a fraction of previous profits. As other major cultural facilities in the city enjoyed a renaissance, Casa Loma was in trouble.



## The Casa Loma Advisory Committee (CLAC)

In early 2004 Council asked the Commissioner of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism to appoint a citizen's committee to inquire into Casa Loma's restoration and operation. Chairman Ron Kanter led six other prominent Torontonians, and Councillors Joe Mihevc and Michael Walker through a series of studies, economic analyses, and community sessions to formulate a vision for Casa Loma's future and the steps to get there.





**Above:** Major restoration work on Casa Loma's exterior commenced in 2003

**Opposite:** Crumbling exterior masonry

## The Problems

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After touring Casa Loma and comparing its financial status and governance with similar heritage attractions elsewhere, CLAC identified serious issues which preclude continuing with the status quo at Casa Loma. The status quo is not sustainable.

- Casa Loma lacks a champion due to the lack of a governing body. Responsibilities are split between several City divisions and Kiwanis. No single authority is able to report in a transparent way to Toronto's citizens about their property.
- Casa Loma is cut off from the community. Kiwanis' goal as operator is to earn maximum dollars from tourists.
- Casa Loma's reliance on tourists from outside the GTA makes its attendance more volatile than other city attractions.
- The souvenir shop is in the basement; the restaurant is a deli in the basement. Lacklustre ancillary services at Casa Loma deliver one fifth of the earnings per visitor of other attractions in the city, in spite of the fact there are few alternatives in the neighbourhood.
- In a bad year, Casa Loma's earnings are insufficient to maintain the building and the licence payments. In a good year, earnings net of costs are not reinvested in Casa Loma's programs and services, but are directed to charities.
- In spite of its size, it's hard to find. No physical signposts or walkways connect Casa Loma to the heritage precinct in which it is located: there is no signage to direct people from the subway, no links connecting it to nearby Spadina House, E.J. Lennox's former home, or the City Archives.
- The licence to Kiwanis on a sole source basis is the result of history rather than an open and competitive process.





**Above:** Ancillary services at Casa Loma located in the basement **Below Left:** An empty room on Casa Loma's third floor **Below Right:** The Great Hall





## The Future

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CLAC engaged in extensive consultations with stakeholders, including the Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma, heritage experts, and the community at large. The results of our meetings, the research by City staff and well-known experts in museum operations, forced CLAC to conclude that what is broken needs to be fixed. Given the experience with SARS, 9/11 and the coming need for US tourists to acquire expensive identification to cross international borders, it would be risky to rely as heavily on tourists to support Casa Loma. Its future lies in reconnecting to the citizens of Toronto, as well as tourists. To engage Toronto's interest, Casa Loma must have a single governing body that can raise funds, license operations in an open and competitive fashion, and generate exciting new programs.



## The Vision

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Casa Loma will thrive under a new system of governance that creates a connection with the citizens of the GTA. Curators will create exhibits that tell the fascinating story of Toronto's Edwardian transition from rural hub to a major commercial capital. Casa Loma will become the centrepiece of a heritage precinct in which the Toronto story will unfurl for visitors, from colonial roots to the flourish of modernity. Visitors will move from the City Archives north of Dupont, up the Baldwin steps to the 19th Century at Spadina House, and finally to Casa Loma – the bridge to the dynamic 20th Century.



**Above:** The entrance to Casa Loma

**Above Right:** Spadina Historic House and Gardens

**Right:** The City of Toronto Archives



## The Road Ahead

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- City Council should make use of the new City of Toronto Act to create a non-profit charitable organization, the Casa Loma Trust, to support this vision.
- The Casa Loma Trust should take on the responsibility for and the cost of running Casa Loma, managing all maintenance and operations.
- The Casa Loma Trust should be enabled to raise funds from public and private granting agencies, ticket sales, ancillary sales, corporate sponsorships and charitable donations to sustain the new Casa Loma.
- The Casa Loma Trust should report to Council and the community in a transparent way on an annual basis.
- The Casa Loma Trust should be run by a volunteer board, with expertise in tourism, marketing, heritage, fundraising and hospitality, with City representatives appointed to it by Council.
- The Casa Loma Trust's board should only assign rights by sublicenses after open and competitive processes: including the provision of new programming and interpretation to reflect Toronto's innovative Edwardian period; to operate new and improved ancillary services; to sell sponsorship and naming opportunities. Kiwanis should have every opportunity to respond to requests for the provision of operating services.
- The Casa Loma Trust should work to tie the estate to the historical precinct around it, specifically through the creation of heritage walks, signage, collaborative programming and co-marketing of exhibitions with Spadina Museum, the City Archives, and other Creative City heritage endeavours.
- Casa Loma's operators should be instructed to revise and refresh ancillary services so they act as magnets to draw in the surrounding community.







**Above:** The stables at Casa Loma after partial restoration work



**Left:** Casa Loma from Austin Terrace

**Opposite:** Casa Loma circa 1912-14

## Next Steps

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During the period in which CLAC inquired into Casa Loma's operations, the Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma requested and was granted an extension of its current licence. The licence ends December 2008.

### We propose:

1. That the City appoint a Transition Committee comprised of citizens, City Councillors, and members of Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma:

- to oversee the creation of the Casa Loma Trust;
- to establish a Nominations Committee charged with recruiting board members for the Casa Loma Trust;
- to acquire necessary legal opinions and undertake necessary studies on behalf of the Casa Loma Trust, such as: a best practices study on creating a heritage precinct; reports by City staff on improving public transit access to the estate.

2. That the Transition Committee hand over its responsibilities to the Casa Loma Trust no later than September 2007.

- The Trust's board will supervise the Kiwanis Club of Casa Loma's licence until it lapses in December 2008.
- The Trust's board will initiate and oversee an open and transparent process to find operators for Casa Loma.
- The Trust will also search out grants, donations and sponsorships, ensuring a seamless transition between the old methods of financing and managing Casa Loma, and the new.
- The Trust will recognize the contribution made by Kiwanis to Casa Loma.

CLAC believes following this vision and these steps will ensure that a magnificent Edwardian structure will become self-sustaining and provide many years of enjoyment for the citizens of Toronto.





**Above:** The ornate conservatory ceiling   **Below Left:** A restored room in Casa Loma   **Below Right:** The Great Hall as viewed from the second floor







