

# SwimOP.com

## Swim at ontario place

To the Chair and members of the Executive Committee:

Please add my comments to the agenda for the October 31st, 2023 Executive Committee meeting on item EX9.16 - Preliminary Feasibility Assessment of Siting the Therme Facility at Exhibition Place.

I understand that my comments and the personal information in this email will form part of the public record and that my name will be listed as a correspondent on agendas and minutes of City Council or its committees. Also, I understand that agendas and minutes are posted online and my name may be indexed by search engines like Google.

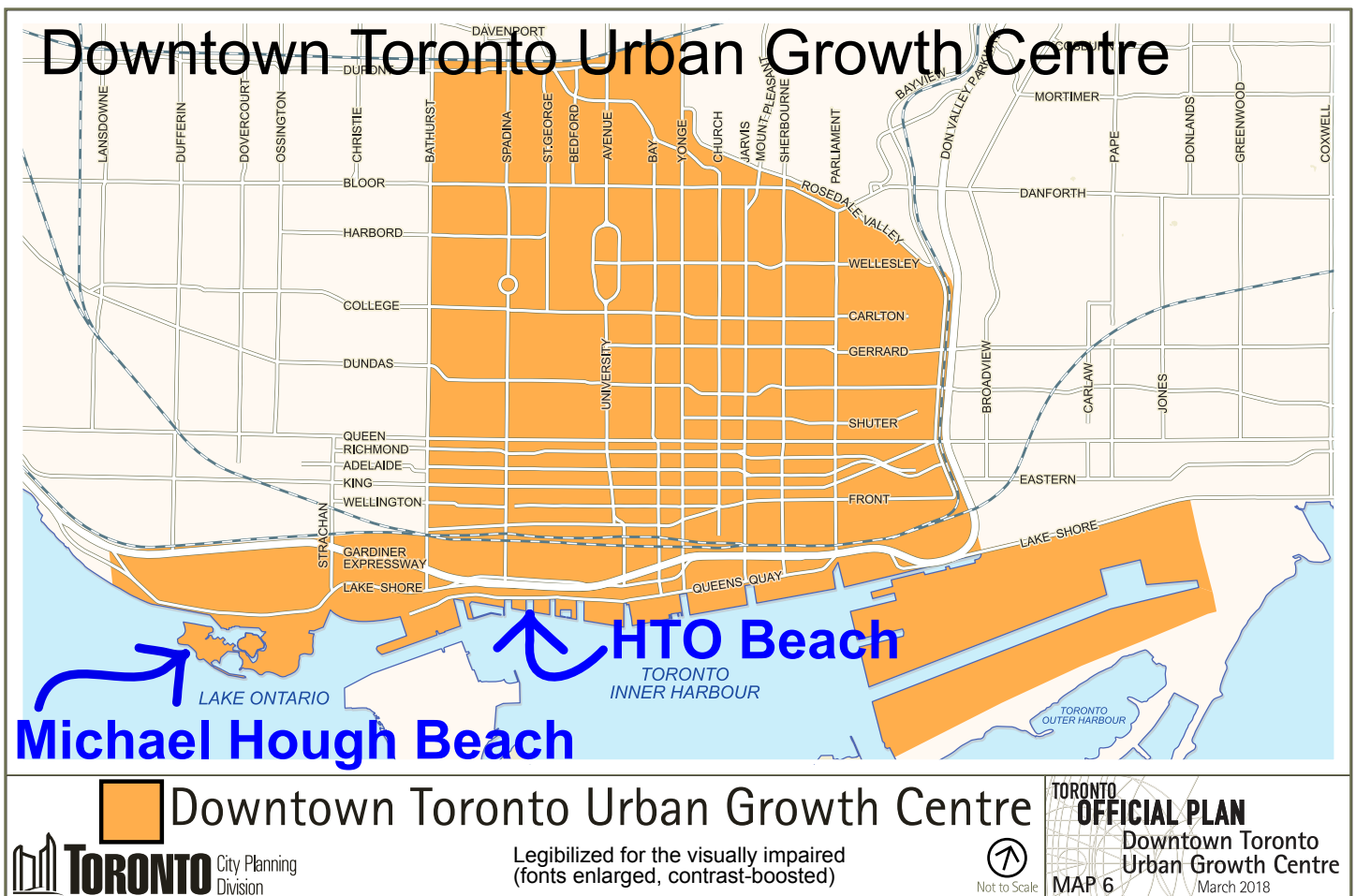
Comments:

I am writing in support of Olivia Chow and Ausma Malik's proposal to move the Therme spa development across the road since the spa does not require nor does it make use of any direct access to the lake, and since access to the lake must be kept public, not privatized.

I am one of thousands of members of a group called SwimOP = Swim at Ontario Place. A small subset of our group (1753 members) are on [Facebook.com/groups/swimop](https://www.facebook.com/groups/swimop) but many of our members do not use Facebook or social media at all. We swim year-round at Michael Hough Beach (formerly known as "Lakeshore Beach" in old City of Toronto records, and also known informally as "the pebble beach") on the South side of the West Island at Ontario Place. This beach is:

1. Downtown Toronto's only true beach, i.e. our only safe and clean access to the waterfront within the downtown core ("Urban Growth Centre") area;
2. Toronto's only pebble beach, i.e. our only sandless (sand-free) beach;
3. Toronto's cleanest beach providing direct access to fresh clean water in the core of downtown Toronto;
4. Toronto's only accessible water access point, since the paved pathway comes very close to the water, and the pebbles afford easy year-round access to a mobility aid such as wheelchair or scooter, as well as to physiotherapy equipment.

For the record, here is an annotated (legibilized) version of the City of Toronto's own map ([link](#)) where I have labeled Michael Hough Beach in blue:



This is the only true beach within the shaded (orange-colored) downtown core area on the map, although the City of Toronto has provided another beach within this downtown area. This other beach is known as "HTO Beach" or "HTO Beach Park" or "HTO Urban Beach", but it is not what I would personally call a "beach". Although many of us swim at HTO Beach as our alternative location when Ontario Place is closed, some of us have had difficulty getting in and out of the water at HTO Beach due to the poor state-of-repair of the ladders:



This creates a safety hazard, especially for the elderly or those with disabilities, especially during cold water immersion, and cold-water therapy (e.g. winter swims) when grip strength is reduced. Whereas HTO Beach is widely promoted, causing many to arrive with bathing suits and towels for a swim, it is quite disappointing due to the poor maintenance of the water access ladders. The large drop to the water also makes it hard for paddlers or those doing water-based physiotherapy (in-water ball exercises, etc.) to get access to the water with their exercise equipment.

Compare HTO Beach with Michael Hough Beach, which I regard as downtown Toronto's only true "beach", shown in this picture below:



Michael Hough Beach enjoys a South-facing exposure and shelter created by Micheal Hough's ingenious design using 846 trees to break the prevailing Northwest winds while accepting the Southern sunlight exposure together with a carefully sheltered swimming cove that produces favourable currents and storm mitigation year-round. Rather than using sand, he used pebbles which were placed there more than 50 years ago and have remained with zero maintenance. This is ideal for persons with disabilities, such as persons with prosthetics which are easily damaged by sand.

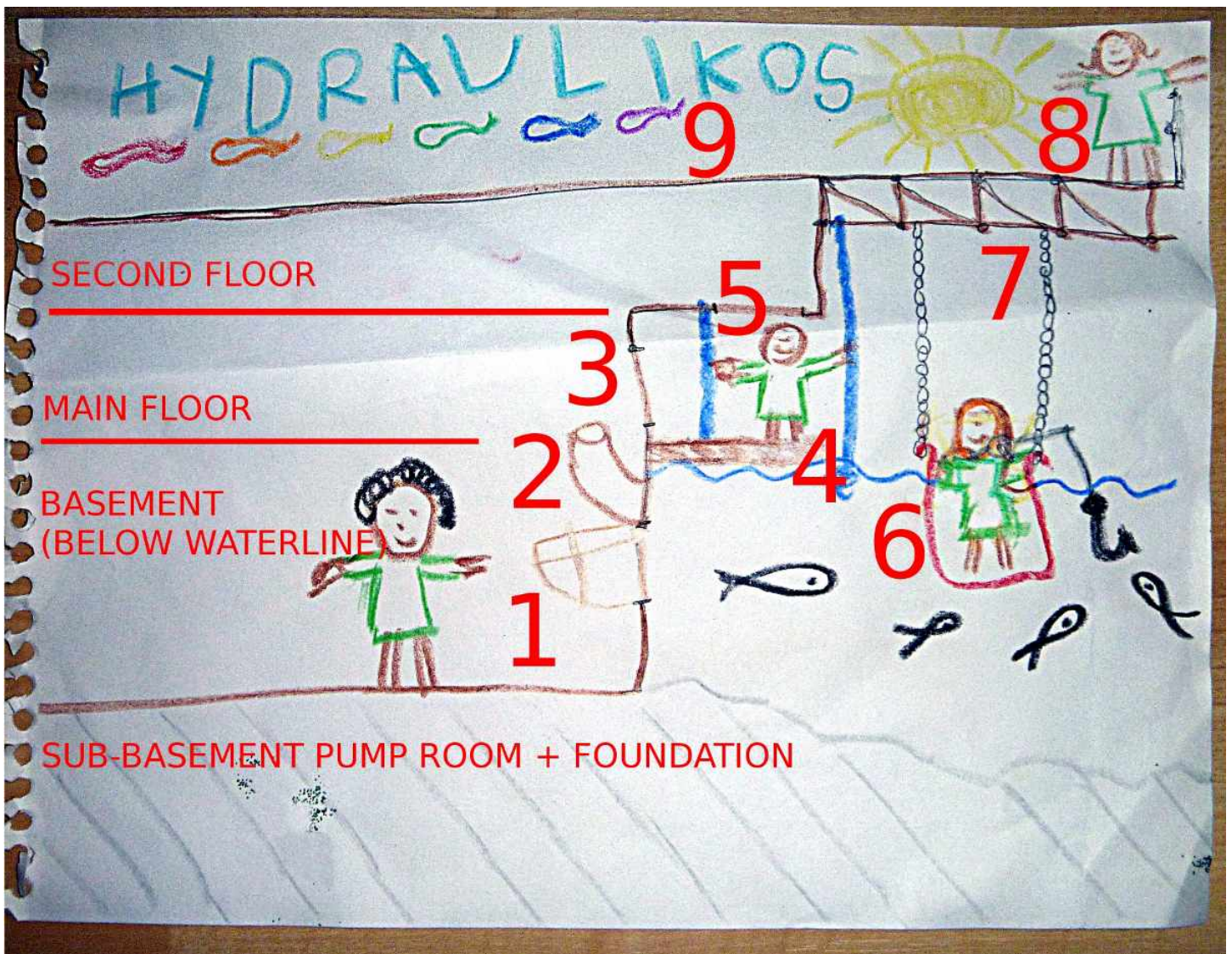
Other beaches like Cherry, Woodbine, Sunnyside, etc., are a long way from the downtown core, and are difficult to reach by persons with disabilities who have limited travel range, and cannot traverse sand or mud. I have a disability due to a back injury so I can no longer sit properly or drive a car or ride a bicycle, so I use a standup mobility aid that can't go long distances or cross sand or mud. Therefore my only choices to access Lake Ontario are Micheal Hough Beach and HTO Beach or jumping into the lake at other spots like Harbourfront or National Yacht Club where the ladders are also in a similar bad state of repair, or other treacherous access points like the rocky shores of Trillium Park, etc., which are less-than-ideal water access points.

Access to fresh clean water is a medical necessity for my physiotherapy and rehabilitation. This is a basic human need and human right = access to clean water, and the water at HTO Beach is less-than-clean, as you can see by the reviews of HTO Beach in the Swim Guide ([link](#)) provided by Lake Ontario Waterkeeper. HTO Beach is listed as beach 992, where it failed 91.7 percent of the swimming water quality tests.

Additionally the ultraclean and clear water at Michael Hough Beach serves a variety of research and artistic purposes. This beach is a unique facility of scientific interest to many who also know it as "Teach Beach" owing to the outdoor classroom built there to teach principles of Water-Human-Computer Interaction = [waterhci.com](http://waterhci.com) where we have hosted an annual conference for many years.

As part of this annual conference series, 12 years ago, we presented a design for a spa, waterpark, science centre, conference centre, and research lab at Ontario Place to connect people to the lake and to nature. My daughter, then age 5, came up with the original design:





featuring waterslides going down into the lake, hot tubs floating in the lake, a sauna to warm up in to swim in the lake, and various other ways to help people connect to nature (WaterHCI / Hydraulikos Symposium, 2021 November 22nd). See [waterhci.com](http://waterhci.com) and [mersivity.com](http://mersivity.com) for more background on this long-standing research effort in using Michael Hough Beach as a science outreach teaching centre and research lab.

All around the world, including our own remediation of the Don River, cities are trying to reclaim waterfront to improve and encourage public access to water.

Therme's recent proposal does the exact opposite: it merely uses the magnificent waterfront as a visual backdrop, while totally enclosing and isolating spa users from nature and the lake's waters.

I connected with people from Therme and they appeared to have little interest in our 25 year's experience connecting people to water. I also invited them for a tour of the island and a swim, and I swam with Therme's Mark Lawson. On 2022 August 16th we swam together from Michael Hough Beach, to the gap in the Western breakwall.





At this time, I warned Mark about the "armpit of the breakwall" where the sewer discharge is located, i.e. to stay away from that area during our swim. This is where there are dangerous currents, strong Westerly winds, and exhaust fumes, soot, and tire dust from the major arterial road running adjacent to this location.

Interestingly enough, a while later, Therme proposed to destroy the existing South-facing beach and build their new beach at that exact spot that I warned them was the worst and most dangerous place to swim.

We're greatly concerned about the proposal to destroy the South-facing Micheal Hough Beach and build a new beach on the West side of the island, in the armpit of the breakwall right next to the CSO (Combined Sewer Outfall), and the major arterial roadway.

This is the worst possible location for the beach, as it would change the beach from Toronto's cleanest beach to Toronto's dirtiest beach.

Micheal Hough originally considered this location but determined it was too windy and stormy to make a comfortable swimming beach.

We cannot imagine why anyone would want to make such a beach at such a location other than to deliberately "enswewage" beach. If they can't bring the sewer over the to beach, the next best thing for them is to bring the beach to the sewer so that they can sell more "pool passes" to swim inside the paid ticketed spa. See my Toronto Star OPed on this exact hypothesis ([link](#)).

Thus we feel there is a potential conflict-of-interest that might encourage the "ensewagement" of the beach to sell more pool passes, i.e. to boost ticket sales by making the beach stink as badly as possible, thus forming a visual-only backdrop.

To test this hypothesis I asked a question of Therme, the Austrian company that aims to move the beach to the sewer.

The question I asked was "Will paying customers be able to warm up in your sauna and then swim in the lake and warm up in the sauna again?", i.e. does the new spa connect people to the lake and encourage more people to swim in the water.

The answer appears to be "No."

In other words, the spa would simply be totally separate from the lake and therefore has no place being next to the lake other than to reinforce the notion that the lake is dirty.

In this way the new proposal serves simply to enswewage the beach to sell more tickets to their glass-box spa facility that isolates people from nature.

The more we can encourage rather than discourage swimming in the lake, not just in pools, the more that we can love the lake and be attune to it, and ensure that we have clean water to drink tomorrow.

In my teachings at University of Toronto, I have made the argument that Ontario, home of the world's largest (by surface area) freshwater lake, is water capital of the world, and Toronto is the capital of Ontario. Our Great Lakes hold 21% of the world's (and 85% of North America's) freshwater. Toronto is the largest city on the Great Lakes. More specifically, I have made the argument that Ontario Place is at the epicentre of the world's water capital, and is in fact the most precious piece of land in Ontario. It is also perhaps the world's most strategic piece of land in regards to protecting the Great lakes.

Thereme's proposal is dangerous to Lake Ontario, and to our freshwater stewardship for a variety of reasons.

Therefore we support Olivia Chow's proposal to move the spa across the street to the Exhibition grounds. This makes the most sense since the spa is not actually using, nor does it intend to use, water access to the lake, and since water access to the lake is extremely precious to those who require it for physical, affective, and mental health and wellbeing. We must do everything we can to preserve what little access to nature and, in particular, to fresh clean water, and to the stewardship of our water, that we can. We have a responsibility to the rest of the world to serve as role models for how we treat this precious public resource.

I wish to thank Bruce, Perry, Dan, Patrick, Margie, and many others at SwimOP for providing useful feedback in the drafting of this letter.

Best regards,

Steve

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