

Improved Active Transportation and Water Access to Toronto Island Park

Date: April 29, 2025

To: Executive Committee

From: Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, General Manager, Parks and Recreation, General Manager, Transportation Services

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report provides a response to City Council's direction to report on improved active transportation access to Toronto Island, including possibilities for a fixed link across the Eastern Gap. This report also responds to other directives related to moving visitors to and from Toronto Island Park, including opportunities to maximize the service of private water taxi operators and the exploration of a relief ferry vessel.

The Toronto Island Park is a signature destination for residents and tourists, with over 1.5 million visitors taking the City's ferries every year and approximately 485,000 trips taken by water taxi. On peak weekends and holidays in July and August, Toronto Island Park sees almost 18,000 visitors per day. In July 2024, Council approved the Toronto Island Master Plan (TIMP) which identified improved access to Toronto Island as a priority, and discussed opportunities for reducing economic barriers for accessing the island and expanding affordable programming and rentals park-wide.

Since the TIMP was adopted, Council has provided staff with a number of directions related to access. Staff have been directed to undertake discussions with private water taxi operators to explore options for maximizing water taxi services to and from Toronto Island Park, and to understand and address barriers related to this goal. Through the Council decision on the award for the construction of new fully electric ferry vessels, Council also requested staff to explore opportunities to lease or retain relief vessels to provide additional service to and from Toronto Island while the new ferries are being procured. Taken together, these directives highlight the critical importance of aligning investments and agreements to facilitate improved access to Toronto Island Park.

On the city side of the harbour, waterfront revitalization has, since 2001, created a number of new destinations from east-to-west, with more to come in the short- and long-term; Biidaasige Park, for example, will open in summer 2025. Further, tens of thousands of new residents are anticipated along the waterfront in the coming decades, particularly in the Port Lands. These changes also create opportunities and demands for new water transportation options. For example, people could have the ability to

Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

travel from Bathurst Quay to the Parliament Slip or Biidaasige Park; or they could be able to travel from any of these locations to and from Toronto Island Park. New water transportation options could be realized in both the short- and medium-term through the work underway to improve water taxi services and a proposed sea bus pilot.

A fixed link over the Eastern Gap is another concept motivated by the popularity of the Toronto Island and the revitalization of the waterfront. It has been advocated over the years by some private architects, planners, and other individuals to complement waterfront revitalization. The Eastern Gap is the waterway separating Ward's Island on the west side from the Port Lands on the east side (See Attachment 1). It is approximately 220 to 265 metres wide (See Attachment 2). Proposals have included different bridge concepts, a gondola or tunnel. Proponents note the popularity of similar structures in Toronto and around the world for their physical utility and tourist appeal. Council has directed staff to review proposals and consult with stakeholders regarding this concept, as part of the broader analysis and consultation regarding the goal of improving access to the Island.

While conceptually appealing, a fixed link would face a number of constraints, which are described in this report. The constraints would not make a fixed link project impossible, but they do indicate that such a project would not be quick, simple or inexpensive. Further, a fixed link would not replace the need for planned short- and medium-term investments in Toronto Island access, many of which are underway now. A fixed-link should therefore be thought of as a potential long-term project, possibly to coincide with the future development of planned mixed-use precincts in the Port Lands, with the potential to complement, not replace, existing initiatives.

Taking into the account the multiple initiatives underway and planned, staff, through this report, recommend the establishment of a *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force*. The Task Force would be convened by the City Planning Division (Waterfront Secretariat), working closely with Waterfront Toronto and the relevant City Divisions. The purpose of the *Task Force* would be to accelerate and coordinate the short- and medium-term Toronto Island access improvements that are currently underway, and advance due diligence related to long-term opportunities, such as a fixed link. While undertaking this work, alignment with the Waterfront Toronto 2020 Marine Use Strategy would allow for greater coordination between Agencies and Divisions all responsible for inner harbour transportation, particularly as visits and interest in waterfront destinations grow.

The report reflects collaboration between City Planning, Parks and Recreation, Transportation Services, Engineering and Construction Services, Economic Development and Culture, and the City Manager's Office. As recommended, these City divisions and agencies would continue to advance the ongoing improvements and longer-term due diligence as the *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force* through the implementation of marine transportation initiatives.

Consistent with Council and Committee direction, consultations informing the analysis of a fixed link included Ports Toronto, CreateTO, Waterfront Toronto, and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA). Stakeholder engagement has included the Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

Toronto Industry Network, Redpath Sugar, Cinespace, the Passenger & Commercial Vessel Association and the Waterfront BIA. The team also spoke with individuals and organizations familiar with past fixed link concepts such as a bridge or gondola. Broader public consultation was considered to be a future work plan activity, should Council ultimately direct staff to proceed based on further due diligence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, General Manager, Parks and Recreation, and General Manager, Transportation Services, recommend that:

1. City Council direct the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, General Manager, Parks and Recreation, General Manager, Transportation Services, and General Manager, Fleet Services to:
 - a. Convene a Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force for the purpose of actioning, accelerating and coordinating short- and medium-term Toronto Island access improvements and advancing due diligence related to long-term opportunities, including a fixed link, and inner harbour transportation.
 - b. Request that senior leaders from Waterfront Toronto participate as standing members of the Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Task Force.
 - c. Engage staff of the appropriate City divisions, as well as staff of CreateTO, Ports Toronto, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and Harbourfront Centre.
 - d. Consult, on a regular basis, with interested members of City Council, including the local Councillors.
 - e. Consult, as appropriate, with users of the inner and outer harbours, including businesses that rely on shipping and boating, community organizations, and organizations that represent the recreational boating community.
 - f. Undertake public engagement/consultation, including Indigenous engagement, as appropriate.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There are no financial implications resulting from the recommendations included in this report. The staffing resources and external expertise needed to explore options and undertake the immediate due diligence would be supported by existing resources within divisional budgets.

The analysis of fixed link options and other initiatives would require longer-term review, as well as community and stakeholder engagement. Future funding requirements to Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

increase capacity in the areas of study development, planning, and divisional capital coordination beyond near-term due diligence, if determined necessary, would be identified and included through future reporting.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the information as presented in the Financial Impact Section.

EQUITY STATEMENT

The Toronto Island Park is the largest green space in downtown Toronto, acting as an oasis for Torontonians from many walks of life, and from all parts of the City.

The Toronto Island Master Plan provides a vision for the City grounded in principles that aim to achieve a successful and healthy future for this significant and signature place. The goals of the TIMP include facilitating investment and improvements that support Indigenous communities, equity-deserving groups, and vulnerable residents to be part of Toronto's collective experience of Toronto Island.

RECONCILIATION IMPACT

The Toronto Island Master Plan notes that there has been thousands of years of uninterrupted Indigenous presence on the Toronto Islands and includes *Revealing An Indigenous Place* as one of the six goals of the Plan. This goal is described as follows:

“Minisiing, the Ojibwe name referring to Toronto Island, has long been integral to Indigenous practices, life, and ceremony. Through on-going work with Indigenous communities, spaces for ceremony, teaching and learning traditional practices, and sharing the rich and ongoing stories of this place and all its inhabitants will be identified. Through honouring the deep and uninterrupted legacy of Indigenous peoples within these lands and waters an Indigenous place will be revealed for all who set foot on the Island.”

The TIMP will help to advance measures identified in the Reconciliation Action Plan, including the following:

- 13. Support Indigenous Health and Well-being;
- 15. Support Indigenous Placekeeping; and
- 16. Celebrate Indigenous Arts and Culture.

The proposed *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Task Force* would engage with treaty and territorial First Nations partners, as well as urban Indigenous communities (First Nations, Inuit and Métis residents) of Toronto on future proposals and initiatives. Staff would coordinate this work to align with complementary existing engagement processes.

DECISION HISTORY

Fixed Link Across The Eastern Gap

At its meeting on June 26 and 27, 2024, City Council requested the City Manager, in consultation with the General Manager, Transportation Services, the General Manager, Parks Forestry and Recreation, the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, and other relevant City Officials, Agencies and Boards, including CreateTO, Ports Toronto, Waterfront Toronto, and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, to conduct a review of proposals, feasibility studies, and traffic studies for improved active transportation access to Toronto Island, including possibilities for an active transportation connection across the Eastern Gap for further consideration, and to report back to City Council in the first quarter of 2025.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM19.18>

At its meeting on June 4, 2024, the Economic and Community Development Committee requested that the City Manager, as part of the first quarter of 2025 report on active transportation access to Toronto Island requested in MM19.18, facilitate consultation with stakeholders including, PortsToronto, Toronto Industry Network, Netflix Canada, tour and cruise operators, and other port users, about a fixed link between Toronto Islands and the Port Lands over the Eastern Gap, and include estimates of economic impacts of disruption to the Eastern Gap in the report.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EC14.15>

2020 Marine Use Strategy (Waterfront Toronto)

The first Marine Use Strategy was released in 2006. Waterfront Toronto, in partnership with the City of Toronto, PortsToronto and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, completed an update to the Marine Use Strategy, which was released in 2020.

The updated Marine Use Strategy Report aligns the 2006 strategy with new planning initiatives, ongoing and planned development projects, infrastructure investments and habitat restoration projects. The report also addresses the growing and expanding user base and interest in water-related recreation and transportation. It acts as a roadmap, identifying how we can implement recommendations to improve Toronto's harbour. The focus of the report is on three key streams: movement (creating more connections to more destinations), mooring (providing appropriate locations for boats), and management (identifying roles and responsibilities across various users and organizations).

The 2020 strategy is available here: [Marine Use Strategy | Waterfront Toronto](#)

Central Waterfront Secondary Plan (2003)

At its meeting on April 16, 2003, City Council adopted the *Central Waterfront Secondary Plan* as an amendment to the former City of Toronto Official Plan. The Plan includes the Port Lands and sets out visions for naturalizing the mouth of the Don River, new parkland, road networks, and transit-oriented mixed-use communities therein.

The Plan identified four Core Principles to help operationalize the original waterfront revitalization vision. These principles are:

1. Removing Barriers/Making Connections;
2. Building a Network of Spectacular Waterfront Parks and Public Spaces;
3. Promoting a Clean and Green Environment; and,
4. Creating Dynamic and Diverse New Communities.

The City Council decision and staff report are available here:

<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/2003/agendas/council/cc030414/plt5rpt/cl001.pdf>

Next Phase of Waterfront Revitalization

On July 19, 2022, City Council adopted item 2022.EX34.10 with amendments, which among other things provided support, in principle, for undertaking a further phase of waterfront revitalization enabled through tri-government funding commitments and governance. City Council also endorsed the following four interconnected priorities to guide a further phase of waterfront revitalization:

- strategic and inclusive economic development;
- truth, justice and reconciliation, including through Indigenous engagement;
- equity, inclusion and access, including through housing and community benefits; and,
- climate resilience and sustainability.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2022.EX34.10>

On December 17, 2024, City Council adopted EX19.2 - Next Phase of Waterfront Revitalization – Update, with amendments, including endorsement of a first set of priorities for a tri-government funded Next Phase of Waterfront Revitalization..

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EX19.2>

TO Core – Downtown Secondary Plan

At its October 2017 meeting, City Council adopted a staff report entitled, 'TOcore: Proposed Downtown Plan' and directed staff to undertake stakeholder and public consultation on the five Downtown infrastructure strategies, including the Parks and Public Realm Plan.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2017.PG22.1>

On May 22, 2018, Council adopted the Downtown Parks and Public Realm Plan, which included the Core Circle, a connected system of topographic and natural features that encircle Downtown, featuring the Toronto Island to the south.

<http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/viewAgendaItemHistory.do?item=2018.PG29.5>

Toronto Island Park Master Plan

At its meeting on July 24 and 25th, 2024, City Council adopted the Toronto Island Master Plan as the general direction in which improvements to Toronto Island shall be undertaken over the next 25 years, as well as other recommendations relating to the implementation of the plan.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.IE15.2>

Ferries

At its meeting on March 26 and 27, 2025, City Council adopted recommendations relating to:

Electric Ferries Shoreside Infrastructure and Ferry Terminal Improvement Projects, including approval of budgets supporting these projects.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.CC28.4>

Toronto Ferry Service Operational Review, including the plan to formally transition the authority of the ferry operation from Parks & Recreation to Fleet Services by Q4 2025

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX21.3>

At its meeting on January 28, 2025, Executive Committee considered recommendations from the Toronto Accessibility Advisory Committee related to accessibility for people with disabilities at the Jack Layton Ferry Terminal.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.DI10.3>

At its meeting on July 24 and 25th, 2024, City Council adopted recommendations relating to the awarding of agreements relating to the construction of two new fully electric ferry vessels as well as recommendations supporting related infrastructure works required at Jack Layton Ferry Terminal and Toronto Islands, as well as opportunities to retain relief vessels to provide additional service to and from Toronto Island while the new ferries are being procured.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.GG14.8>

Water Taxis

At its meeting December 17 and 18, 2024, City Council adopted recommendations to provide additional authority to provide the necessary authority to Parks, Forestry and Recreation, to issue annual licences to qualified water taxi operators, to undertake discussions with water taxi operators to understand and address barriers related to maximizing water taxi service to and from Toronto Island Park, and explore options for maximizing water taxi services.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.MM24.39>

Land Ownership

At its meeting on April 9, 2018, the Parks and Environment Committee considered a report on Establishing Ownership of the Eastern Gap Seawall and Adjacent Lands on Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

the Toronto Islands. The Committee referred the item back to staff for further consultation and study, including with the Federal Government, Ports Toronto and the Provincial Government.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2018.PE26.6>

Mayor's Economic Action Plan

At its meeting on November 13 and 14, 2024, City Council adopted, with amendments, recommendations relating to the report *Sidewalks to Skylines: An Action Plan for Toronto's Economy (2025-2035)*, including actions related to the Port of Toronto.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2024.EC16.2>

At its meeting on March 26 and 27, 2025, City Council adopted recommendations related to the Mayor's Economic Action Plan in Response to United States Tariffs, including those related to the operation of the Port of Toronto and the improvement of the mobility of goods and services connected with the economy.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2025.EX21.2>

COMMENTS

Short and Medium Term Access Improvements

1. Toronto Island Master Plan

The Toronto Island Master Plan (TIMP) was adopted by City Council in July 2024 to guide improvements, operations and visitor experience in one of Toronto's most beloved, and largest parks. Over the next ten years, not including the procurement of new ferry vessels, the City will be investing more than \$50 million to improve the Island Park visitor experience and address the pressures of climate change, aging infrastructure, and population growth. Providing for affordable access to Toronto Island and experiences on the Island is important for visitors from across the City. For many Torontonians, a trip to Toronto Island Park is a special event, with family, friends, or to celebrate cultural events. Toronto Island offers an escape from the city, with access to large, passive greenspaces, waterways and beaches.

One of the goals of the TIMP is: "Improving Access and Connection", which emphasizes a commitment to address the need for greater mobility options to, from and on the Island. The TIMP recognizes that access to the Island is critically important to the visitor experience. Various recommendations within the plan speak to improving the ticketing, landing, and return experience including enhancements at the Islands-side landings that will be implemented incrementally over time

Specific recommendations related to accessibility and mobility on land include "address[ing] physical barriers to enhance movement and improve universal accessibility park-wide" and "reinforc[ing] a 'car-free' experience". This is anticipated to be accomplished by "encourag[ing] active transportation as a primary way to move

around the park” and “expand[ing] cycling infrastructure” by “ensur[ing] cycling facilities are consistent across the park and meet the expanding needs for park visitors”.

Accessibility improvements and equitable access to the Toronto Island Park experience is prioritized throughout the TIMP. These improvements include new wayfinding improvements of varied formats, providing access throughout the park via accessible pathways, bridges and boardwalks upgrading park facilities and amenities to ensure accessible services are located throughout the park, designing park spaces to ensure universal accessibility needs and requirements, including lighting and supporting safety year-round.

On the water, the TIMP prioritizes ferry access as the current, and anticipated, primary method of accessing the Park for pedestrians, cyclists and vehicles. It does so in consideration for the City’s legislative requirements and its ongoing procurement of new electric ferry vessels whose delivery will increase capacity to and from the Island and improve service reliability while also aligning the fleet with the City’s goals related to greenhouse gas emission reduction. The Toronto Island Master Plan includes recommendations related to water taxi and shuttle services in alignment with the City's Marine Use Strategy.

2. Ferry Fleet Renewal

Toronto Island Park is primarily accessed through ferry service operated by the City. Under the 1993 Toronto Islands Residential Community Stewardship Act, the City of Toronto is mandated to provide year-round ferry transportation to and from Toronto Island.

The City's ferry fleet includes four primary vessels, and one heritage vessel, the Trillium. Together, this fleet transports approximately 1.5 million passengers and over 5,000 vehicles annually. While ferry service is maintained year-round, more than 80 per cent of passenger volume takes place from May-September.

The City is investing over \$145 million in the coming years to procure two new all-electric ferry vessels and to make related improvements to the Jack Layton Ferry Terminal. These investments are anticipated to enhance ferry capacity, service reliability and the passenger experience. The first of the new ferry vessels is anticipated to enter service in the Fall of 2026 and the second in the Spring of 2027. Replacement of two additional ferries is also included in the Parks & Recreation 2025-2034 Capital Budget.

3. Jack Layton Ferry Terminal and Ferry Passenger Experience Initiatives

CreateTO’s managed corporation Toronto Port Lands Company (TPLC) is presently delivering improvements to the Jack Layton Ferry Terminal. Waterfront Toronto has been engaged, through TPLC, to design and deliver the next phase of immediate-, short-, and medium-term improvements to the Terminal.

The scope of work, which builds on recent improvements to the passenger experience and is planned for delivery starting in summer 2025, includes interim permanent shade structure within the terminal, improved queuing processes, upgrades to the waiting

area, a public art program, and other enhancements to improve safety, operations, and user comfort.

4. Water Taxi Capacity and Access Improvements

In addition to the City's ferry service, water taxis provide passenger transportation services to and from Toronto Island Park. Transport Canada regulates the operation of water taxis, which are privately owned and operated. Along the waterfront, private water taxi companies have agreements with various (non-City) landowners or leaseholders to allow for docking and passenger pick-up & drop off. Harbourfront Centre is the main entity that leases to water taxis on the city-side. Ports Toronto and Waterfront Toronto also lease to entities that provide water taxis. The City does not manage water taxis except for providing licenses to use docks at Toronto Island Park. In 2024, five operators with a total of 53 boats were granted licences to dock at Toronto Island Park locations. In 2023 (the last year of available data), water taxis transported approximately 486,000 passengers (according to an operator survey conducted by the Waterfront BIA) and thus make a significant contribution to transporting people across the Inner Harbour to Toronto Island.

At Toronto Island Park side, there are six operational Dock Access Licensed Docking Points. Of these locations, the most popular docking location for water taxis is at Centre Island. As a result of the popularity of Centre Island as an arrival and departure point, water taxis are often queuing for a space at the dock wall, which has an impact on the ability to meet passenger demand and the overall efficiency of the service.

In early 2025, Parks and Recreation engaged with water taxi operators to explore options for improving water taxi services at Toronto Island. Based on preliminary pre-season estimates, operators advised City staff they are planning to add up to 5 additional licensed boats, equating to approximately 46,000 more passengers moved in 2025 (roughly a 10% increase from 2024). City staff are advancing the issuance of the required licenses in time for peak season.

Additionally, operators responded that water taxi services could be further improved and expanded with additional and/or floating docking infrastructure, wayfinding to help the public identify water taxi operator locations, and increased communication and coordination between the City and operators. In response, Parks and Recreation staff are exploring the addition of a floating dock on the Island in summer 2025, adding signage, online information about water taxi locations and establishing a reference group for continued coordination.

5. Marine Use Strategy Initiatives, Including a Sea Bus Pilot

In 2020 Waterfront Toronto (WT), along with the City of Toronto, Ports Toronto, TRCA, updated the 2006 Marine Use Strategy. The Movement chapter of the Strategy is rooted in a principle of creating "more connections to more destinations". This means not only making it easier to get people to the water's edge, but also on, in and over the water. This includes recommendations related to:

- The creation of continuous waterfront connections;
- Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

- Ideas for the expansion of water-based public transportation; and,
- Recommendations for improving 'landside' planning, development and public space decisions, to provide more support for active marine uses.

As a result of recommendations from the 2020 Marine Use Strategy, Waterfront Toronto is leading a Sea Bus Feasibility Study. A Sea Bus would be a water-based transportation service with a fixed route and schedule. It would augment the existing City ferry and private water taxi services by expanding the reach of marine transportation options to serve planned destinations further west and east. Over time, this service could provide marine transportation options for new communities such as Ookwemin Minising and the East Bayfront, in addition to destinations planned at Biidaasige Park and Ontario Place, as well as existing destinations in the central waterfront and Toronto Island Park. The size and capacity of a prospective Sea Bus could change over time, subject to demand. While the longer-term vision for this study will depend on the buildout of new destinations, a series of short- and medium-term steps to build toward such a system are being assessed. A pilot project involving smaller vessels could make use of docking shared with the inner harbour's water taxis to test a new service model. Further details on a potential Sea Bus pilot would be resolved through the work of the *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force*.

6. Relief Vessels

In 2024, City Council directed Parks and Recreation to explore opportunities to lease or otherwise retain relief vessels to provide additional service to and from Toronto Island while new ferries are being procured. Staff analyzed the potential of sourcing leased vessels for the City to operate, as well as seeking a third-party provider to operate a relief vessel. Based on staff analysis and a market sounding, staff have determined that licensing a third-party vessel is the preferred approach, although this option still poses challenges to implement, including the identification of appropriate docking infrastructure and shoreline locations. Staff are developing a formal and transparent process to test the market for a licensed vessel (e.g., a Request for Proposals) and believe that, if successful, the earliest such a vessel could be in service would be 2026.

As with the potential Sea Bus, the relief vessel would provide additional and complementary transportation options to the City's ferry fleet, and could serve both north-south, as well as west-east routes. Feasibility work to confirm go to market approaches and timing will continue in 2025 through the recommended *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force*, ensuring a cohesive waterfront-wide approach is taken to advance these approaches.

Fixed Link - Opportunity

There is a history of discussions relating to a link across both the Eastern and Western Gaps. They were identified conceptually over a century ago, in the 1912 document, *Toronto Harbour Commissioners Report, Toronto Waterfront Development 1912 – 1920*. Neither link was pursued at that time. In the decades since, the focus of a fixed link was primarily on the Western Gap, and the connection to the airport. Eventually this led to a plan for a bridge, which was a focus of debate and planning in the late 1990's

Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

and early 2000's, ultimately rejected by City Council in December 2003. In 2011, a Toronto Port Authority (Ports Toronto) proposal for a pedestrian tunnel spanning the Western Gap to Billy Bishop Airport was supported by Council. The tunnel, owned and operated by PortsToronto and its partners, opened in 2015 and exclusively provides access from the mainland to the Airport. No formal proposal for a fixed link over the Eastern Gap has ever been developed, though as noted below, some individuals and businesspeople have proposed ideas over time, some of which have been the subject of media reports.

Toronto Island Master Plan

A fixed link was discussed through the TIMP Community Engagement program, with the public expressing differing opinions on a pedestrian bridge or tunnel to the Island. The final TIMP does not propose the delivery of a new fixed link across the Eastern Gap, but does provide the context in which such a project could be explored. The Plan states that “such an initiative would be a generational project, requiring detailed study and analysis of site conditions and operational considerations that inform feasible design alternatives”. It further states that any future study of a fixed connection should ensure infrastructure aligns with the principles and recommendations of the Master Plan, highlighting the following objectives:

- Any proposed link should prioritize pedestrian and cyclist access. The park should remain a car-free environment;
- Proposed alignments should prioritize positive benefits and minimal impacts on the sensitive environments of the islands;
- Opportunities for integrating ecologically supportive design elements (habitat support, carbon-neutral materials, micro-climate mitigation, etc.) should be pursued;
- Design elements should embody the scale, context and character of the park and reflect conservation best practices for natural and cultural heritage; and,
- Design processes should demonstrate the values, vision, goals, and guiding principles of the master plan.

These objectives, in addition to the relevant Official Plan policies described later in this report, would inform any future exploration of a fixed link to Toronto Island Park.

Other Policy Documents

Other documents which speak to the improvement of connections on the waterfront include:

- The City of Toronto's Downtown Secondary Plan, approved in 2017, and currently in force, identified a “Core Circle” of natural features, including the Toronto Island and water's edge parks. It includes the following policies:
 - 7.8. “The Core Circle will be connected with a continuous pedestrian and cycle route and provide users with an immersive natural experience.”

- 7.32. Access to the Toronto Islands will be improved to support their role as a city-wide park resource. This will be achieved through exploration of improved pedestrian and cycling connections, and improvements to ferry service and facilities.”

Private Proposals

Over time some local architecture firms and individuals have suggested various options for spanning the connection, primarily focused on bridges, but none have been formally explored by the city. Some examples of these concepts include:

1. High Bridge: A bridge that would be high enough to allow recreational sail boats to pass through at any time (about 25-28 m / 80 - 90 feet high) and would lift or open as needed for higher boats such as cruise ships and cargo vessels (about 120 feet high), connecting Ward’s Island to the Port of Toronto.
2. Floating Bridge: A lower bridge, such as a swing bridge, that would only allow small crafts such as canoes and kayaks underneath but would open on a regular schedule (e.g. hourly) to permit all other boats to cross. The location would be similar to the High Bridge.
3. Gondola: A gondola system could potentially avoid both Ward’s Island and the Port of Toronto and could instead land at Centre Island and in multiple locations in and around the Port Lands or elsewhere on the waterfront; and,
4. Tunnel: While there have not been any public proposals for an Eastern Gap tunnel, conceptually this would be similar to the tunnel which travels under the western gap and serves the airport.

Fixed Link - Constraints

While a pedestrian and cycling link over the Eastern Gap is conceptually appealing, there are many constraints which make the feasibility of such a link challenging. They are summarized below.

1. Water Traffic and Economic impacts

The Eastern Gap is the primary entrance and exit between Lake Ontario and the Toronto Harbour for all boat traffic operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all year. It allows boats to travel to the Harbour from the St. Lawrence Seaway and Welland canal as well as the many marinas and clubs around Western Lake Ontario. This includes the cargo ships (both lakera and ocean-going ships) which supply industrial users, such as concrete and construction companies and Redpath sugar, as well as cruise ships, harbour tour vessels, recreational sailing boats and other personal crafts, such as canoes, kayaks, jet skis and paddleboards.

The Port of Toronto serves as a crucial hub, facilitating the passage of cargo and cruise vessels annually through the Eastern Gap. In 2024, 173 cargo ships delivered over 2.0 million metric tonnes of goods to the Port of Toronto and 34 cruise ships brought 18,000

Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

passengers. The land use directions in the *Port Lands Planning Framework* identifies the Port of Toronto as an Existing Use Area, permitting the continuation of a full range of port and maritime uses. The Planning Framework also designates additional port and industrial land uses on sites along the Ship Channel and Unwin Avenue.

According to information provided by PortsToronto, the Port generates over \$460 million in economic activity in Ontario; “more than two million metric tonnes of cargo transit through the Port of Toronto each year, providing the sugar for our coffee, the salt for our roads and the raw materials needed for Toronto’s booming construction industry, including cement, aggregate and steel”.

The role of the Eastern Gap is particularly important because the Western Gap was closed to commercial boat traffic by the Port Authority 15 years ago for several factors, including the height restrictions of the Billy Bishop Toronto City Centre Airport, the fact that the space is more narrow and complex to navigate, with waters rougher than in the Eastern Gap. Finally there is little commercial/cargo activity in the west end of the harbour. The Western Gap therefore is not expected to provide a significant outlet for boats if there are new constraints across the Eastern Gap.

The businesses served by cargo ships are vital to the economy of Toronto and to the Province of Ontario. A 2023 economic impact study noted that the Port has an economic impact of over \$460 million and generates over 670 direct jobs. A fixed link would need to be designed and managed to avoid disruption or displacement of this economic activity. Should the presence of a bridge or other link create uncertainty about access to the harbour, this would have the potential to drive watercraft and businesses away from the central waterfront.

2. Limited Transit Connectivity

Whereas Jack Layton Ferry Terminal is well-connected with regional and local transit connections, the Eastern Gap location is served by minimal transit at present or in longer-term plans. Transit access south of the Ship Channel faces several limitations primarily due to land-use priorities and the necessity of accommodating industrial and port activities. While Cherry Street remains the primary north-south transit link within the western Port Lands, its extension beyond the Ship Channel is not planned for dedicated streetcar service. This is largely because the area south of the Ship Channel is designated for continued port and industrial use, which does not justify the infrastructure investment required for high-capacity transit. Currently, the area south of the Ship Channel lacks significant bus service coverage and there is no transit stop at the Port of Toronto. The closest existing transit options are:

- The seasonal Bus 202, which runs from Union Station to Cherry Beach from mid-May to October with a stop at Unwin Avenue and Cherry Street;
- Bus 114, Queens Quay East, which goes south on Cherry Street, has a stop at Cherry Street and Commissioners Street and then goes east on Commissioners Street;
- The closest streetcar is the 504, which goes east on King Street and south on Cherry Street to the Distillery Loop, just north of the rail corridor; and,
- In the future the Waterfront East LRT line will extend the 504A King Street streetcar route south from the Distillery Loop through a new portal under the

Metrolinx rail corridor, extending south across the Cherry Street Rail Bridge to a loop on Commissioners Street.

Transit access remains an important goal, as outlined in the Port Lands Planning Framework, especially for recreational destinations such as Cherry Beach. The Port Lands Planning Framework identified a further southern extension of the 504 streetcar along Cherry Street to Polson Quay, which would provide better access while maintaining the area's industrial and port functions. Design work has not begun and there is no schedule or budget for this extension at this time, nor is the extension expected to be in delivery until after 2040. Another key challenge for this area is balancing transit access with goods movement, as the Port Lands in this area hosts a significant volume of truck traffic. Ensuring efficient freight transport is crucial for the area's economic viability. The importance of both transit access and industrial needs reflects the complexity of transportation planning in the Port Lands.

3. *Design and Operational Constraints*

- Height

Vertically, the design of a potential bridge or gondola would have to fit into a figurative window above the maximum height of cargo and cruise ships and below the flight path of airplanes.

The top of the structure could be no higher than 76 metres, in order to allow for safe landings of airplanes at Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport. This height is defined in the *Airport Zoning Regulations (AZR) for Outer Surface* (<https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2013/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-64350.pdf>).

The bottom of the structure could be no lower than 39 metres above the water, which PortsToronto has identified as the required airdraft to allow for cargo and cruise ships. This would accommodate the St. Lawrence Seaway regulations, which identify a maximum height of 36.6 metres, as well as an adequate buffer for fluctuations in lake water levels.

This vertical window provides a general outline of the vertical constraints, a more specific number would have to be assessed and determined through early design stages of a particular fixed link implementation.

A bridge that is 39 metres high would be about the height of a 12-storey building. Potentially, extensive ramp structures would be required to get up to a 39-metre height, which would require further land taking, safety and maintenance questions. Alternatively, some proponents have suggested that the bridge could be integrated with a building, in which case elevators could be used to reach the required height.

An operable bridge, which opens and closes, could be lower. It would require more complex machinery, an operator day and night all year, and would potentially have to open and close frequently with resulting lineups in the water and on-land. A lack of predictability in harbour access would potentially drive

recreational and commercial users away from the harbour entirely. Some proponents however, have suggested a bridge could open in a matter of minutes, allowing for a regular hourly schedule that users could effectively plan around, with consistent, prioritized, and long-term coordination with shipping firms.

Below is a chart summarizing information on ship traffic. Information provided by PortsToronto and Harbourfront Centre.

| Ship Type | Height | Frequency |
|--|---|--|
| Cruise Ships and Cargo Ships | Max height of 36.6 m (120 feet). (St. Lawrence Seaway regulations) | 173 Cargo ships and 34 cruise ships in 2024. Operate on 24-hour schedule, delays cost tens of thousands of dollars per hour. |
| Harbour Tour sailing vessels | 27 – 33 metres (90 – 110 ft) | Hundreds of transits a year in and out the East Gap. |
| Recreational Sailing Boats | 18 – 22 metres (60 – 75 ft) | Regular travel through Eastern Gap |
| *A bridge would require additional 2-3 metres to account for Lake Ontario high water levels plus a few meters for safety | | |

- **Staffing:** An operable bridge would likely require around-the-clock staffing and operations. Depending on the type of bridge, it might be left permanently open in the winter, only open for crossing in the warmer months.
- **Piers:** Depending on the design, a bridge could span the entire Eastern Gap, or piers could be installed in the water. The use of piers would potentially simplify the bridge design, but could also impact boat safety, flooding and water conditions.

Piers would need to be designed at an appropriate distance to accommodate cruise ships and cargo ships. The design would also require an analysis of the impact on volatility of wake conditions, such as those generated by larger and faster boats, including water taxis and yachts, on smaller vessels such as stand-up paddleboards, canoes and kayaks. For example, the size and volatility of a wake may increase as it bounces from one hard surface (the pier) to the dock walls and back. Consequently, new piers may require increased enforcement by the Marine Police Unit of the existing slow speed zone and other marine safety regulations.

- **Engineering and Construction:** Further analysis on coastal engineering and geotechnical requirements, architectural design, and work phasing is needed.

4. *Property Ownership*

The City does not own most of the land where a potential bridge would land (See Attachment 3).

On the east side of the channel, the location of the fixed link would likely be in the Port of Toronto at 8 Unwin Avenue at the corner of Unwin Avenue and Cherry Street. The Port is owned by PortsToronto.

The Port of Toronto's tenants include the cruise ship terminal and the Cinespace film studio, both of whom have significant land requirements. Cinespace in particular generates a significant amount of car and truck traffic, through one public street, with large and cumbersome equipment. The requirements of film production often also require a high degree of privacy, which constrains public access to part of the site.

On the Ward's Island side, property ownership is divided between the City, Ports Toronto, the Provincial government and a Provincial Trust which is responsible for the residential neighbourhood.

5. Environmentally Significant Areas and Biodiversity Impacts

Past Eastern Gap bridge proposals have typically shown the west side of the bridge landing on Ward's Island, with the east side in the Port of Toronto. An alternative location on the east side could be Cherry Beach, just south of the Port.

Both the relevant portion of Ward's Island and Cherry Beach locations are designated in the Toronto Official Plan Map 8A as City Parkland, on Map 9 as components of the Natural Heritage System, and on Map 12A as Environmentally Significant Areas. Extensive portions of the eastern extent of Ward's Island are also identified as Provincially Significant Wetlands of Map 12B of the Official Plan. Attachment 4 and Attachment 5 of this report show the location of the Environmentally Significant Areas and Provincially Significant Wetlands respectively. The policies applicable to these areas can restrict or constrain development and require detailed technical studies in order to conserve the ecological integrity of these spaces and protect them from the impacts of development.

The Ward's Island and Cherry Beach ESAs were identified due to the presence of habitat for vulnerable, rare or threatened plants and animals. They provide ecological functions that contribute to the health of ecosystems beyond their boundaries, including the City's Natural Heritage System. The City's ESAs are some of the best examples of biodiversity hot spots and natural spaces within a largely urban environment.

Any consideration of a fixed link in the anticipated location across the Eastern Gap would therefore need to be carefully assessed and would need to demonstrate that there are no reasonable alternatives. City staff would coordinate with TRCA staff in order to ensure the integration of their expertise for any applicable studies undertaken under the Environmental Assessment Act or the Planning Act. The City may also opt to engage TRCA to carry out a Voluntary Project Review (VPR), which matches the TRCA permit review process, if the project moved forward from assessment and due diligence to delivery and implementation. TRCA staff have indicated that assessment of a fixed link would consider the following impacts:

Improved Access to Toronto Island Park

- Increased pedestrian and bicycle traffic on Ward's Island ESA;
- Fixed link structure on migratory bird flyways;
- Winter maintenance activities on water quality and vegetation;
- Cormorant roosting or nesting;
- Water circulation/flow patterns;
- Aquatic habitat compensation; and,
- Flood and storm resilience.

6. *Time Horizon*

Should Council choose to continue to pursue the exploration of a fixed link across the Eastern Gap, the immediate next steps would include undertaking a feasibility study, followed by an Environmental Assessment, detailed design, procurement and construction; a minimum 10 year process from feasibility to fixed link operation. Staff estimate that a feasibility study would require approximately 18-24 months, and a budget of about \$300,000 - \$600,000 (and potentially more if geotechnical field work is included at this stage in the review).

7. *Cost*

While a formal costing would require a more detailed design and analysis, Engineering and Construction Services staff have done a preliminary review of past and precedent projects, available data and current assumptions and identified a potential order of magnitude cost of a minimum of \$100 million for a bridge over the Eastern Gap minimizing impacts to ship traffic. This analysis is based on a preliminary review of past projects, available data and assumptions at the time of preparation. It does not include land costs. The analysis assumes a pedestrian and cycling connection, which would not allow for motorized vehicles to use the bridge. Emergency vehicles would therefore not have access over the bridge without significant added costs.

A driving cost element is attributed to minimizing impacts to ship traffic and preserving the utility of the channel for all the ships that currently use it. This would be done either through a high bridge, openable or some other option.

While staff did not have the experience necessary to complete a cost analysis of a gondola option, consultation with individuals proposing a multi-stop project indicated that it would be higher than the \$100-million noted above. A tunnel design was not analyzed but would be expected to have a similar order of magnitude cost, given the \$82.5 Million cost of the Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport pedestrian tunnel, completed in 2015 and subsequent construction cost escalations.

The final cost could differ significantly due to design, site conditions, market conditions, and other factors. This is only a preliminary estimate – more reliable estimates conforming to standardized error tolerances would require a thorough feasibility study and more development of design options.

Finally, staff anticipate that the cost of a potential fixed link would be over and above the costs identified for existing and planned initiatives to improve access to the Island, including investments in ferries and the Jack Layton Ferry Terminal.

Fixed Link – Future Due Diligence

Given the constraints noted above and the high priority of short- and medium-term improvements to Island access, the proposed *Toronto Island Access Task Force* would consider the fixed link as a longer-term project, which may become more compelling as the mixed-use precincts of the Port Lands develop and transit access improves.

Port Of Toronto and Economic Action Plan

As noted above, a constraint on establishing a fixed link across the Eastern Gap is the potential for such a structure to negatively impact the operations of the Port of Toronto and the businesses and jobs that rely on it. This includes potential impacts on nearby businesses directly served by the Port as well as those throughout the City who are supported by those businesses, including in the construction and food services industries. Any due diligence exercise would have to directly respond to these concerns, which may result in certain options being considered infeasible.

City Council has recognized the importance of the Port and committed to taking steps to strengthen it. The City's recently adopted [Sidewalks to Skylines: A 10-Year Action Plan for Toronto's Economy](#), adopted in November 2024, identifies the role of Toronto's port in the city's visitor economy, goods mobility and global competitiveness. Action 26 of the Action Plan directs staff to optimize the use of Toronto's gateways, in order to create place-based economic, mobility and workforce development plans with a focus on Toronto's globally competitive sectors. This would include strengthening the governance, transparency and investment in the Port to secure a larger share of marine shipping and increase cargo volumes over time.

The *Mayor's Economic Action Plan in Response to United States Tariffs*, adopted by Council in March 2025, includes the following as a project to be explored:

“4. Strengthening Toronto's Ports: Toronto must seize the opportunity to modernize its ports while thinking ambitiously about maximizing their economic advantage. Great Lakes shipping and leisure cruises are rising year-over-year, and to share in the potential and support sustainability goals, Toronto must make long overdue investments in aging, unreliable or absent port infrastructure.”

City Council has directed City Planning to review all land use plans governing the Port area to ensure they will enable the Port to maintain its business and directed Economic Development and Culture to develop a business plan that sustains the critical operations of the Port.

Stakeholders consulted through this study highlighted the importance of the Port of Toronto and the potential for growth. The Toronto Industry Network (TIN), for example, stated the following: “Great Lakes shipping has seen an enormous resurgence and given the current challenges with US-Canadian commerce, the Port offers an

opportunity to open new non-American trade routes. Toronto needs to focus its attention on how to take advantage of this and grow the Port's business, not diminish it."

Economic Development & Culture (EDC) will be advancing actions to strengthen the Port in cooperation with the Waterfront Secretariat and other City staff. The proposed *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force* would include EDC and the work of the *Task Force* would be coordinated with the initiatives related to the Port.

CONCLUSION

Improving active transportation and water access to Toronto Island Park supports the decades-long revitalization of the waterfront and the implementation of the Toronto Island Master Plan. In the short- and medium-term, there are identified opportunities to provide significantly improved service to and from the Island, and to other new destinations east-to-west across the waterfront, including new mixed-use neighbourhoods. In longer-term, as population growth continues on the waterfront and new destinations and drivers emerge, a fixed link and other measures could be considered further for detailed assessment.

Staff therefore recommend the establishment of a *Toronto Island Access and Inner Harbour Transportation Task Force* for the purpose of actioning, accelerating and coordinating the short- and medium-term Toronto Island access improvements including:

1. Water taxi capacity and access improvements;
2. Relief vessels;
3. Toronto Island Master Plan accessibility improvements;
4. Ferry fleet renewal;
5. Jack Layton Ferry Terminal and ferry passenger experience initiatives; and
6. Marine Use Strategy initiatives, including a Sea Bus pilot.

The inter-divisional and inter-agency Task Force would also advance due diligence related to long-term Toronto Island access improvement opportunities, including potential fixed link options such as a bridge, gondola or tunnel. Long-term work would also include due diligence related to longer-term and strategic growth of all services, such as ferries, water taxis, docking and the Sea Bus. Opportunities to improve safety and accessibility would be considered as part of all of the above.

The Task Force would be convened by the City Planning Division (Waterfront Secretariat), working closely with Waterfront Toronto and the relevant City Divisions, including Parks and Recreation, Transportation Services and Fleet Services. The Task Force would engage staff of a range of City divisions, as well as staff of CreateTO, Ports Toronto, the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and Harbourfront Centre. The Task Force would consult with interested members of City Council, including the

local Councillors. As appropriate, staff would consult with users of the inner and outer harbours (including businesses that rely on shipping and boating, community organizations, and organizations that represent the recreational boating community. Also, staff would undertake public consultation and Indigenous engagement, as appropriate.

CONTACT

David Stonehouse
Director, Waterfront Secretariat
City Planning
416-392-8113
David.Stonehouse@toronto.ca

Paul Farish
Director, Parks Planning and Strategic Initiatives
Parks and Recreation
416-392-8705
Paul.Farish@toronto.ca

Jacquelyn Hayward
Director, Planning, Design and Management
Transportation Services
416-392-5348
Jacquelyn.Hayward@toronto.ca

Michael Popik
Director (Acting), Design & Construction, Bridges and Expressways
Engineering and Construction Services
416-392-8487
Michael.Popik@toronto.ca

SIGNATURE

Jason Thorne, MCIP, RPP
Chief Planner and Executive Director
City Planning Division

Howie Dayton,
General Manager, Parks and Recreation

Barbara Gray,
General Manager, Transportation Services

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Key Map – Designated Waterfront Area and Toronto Island

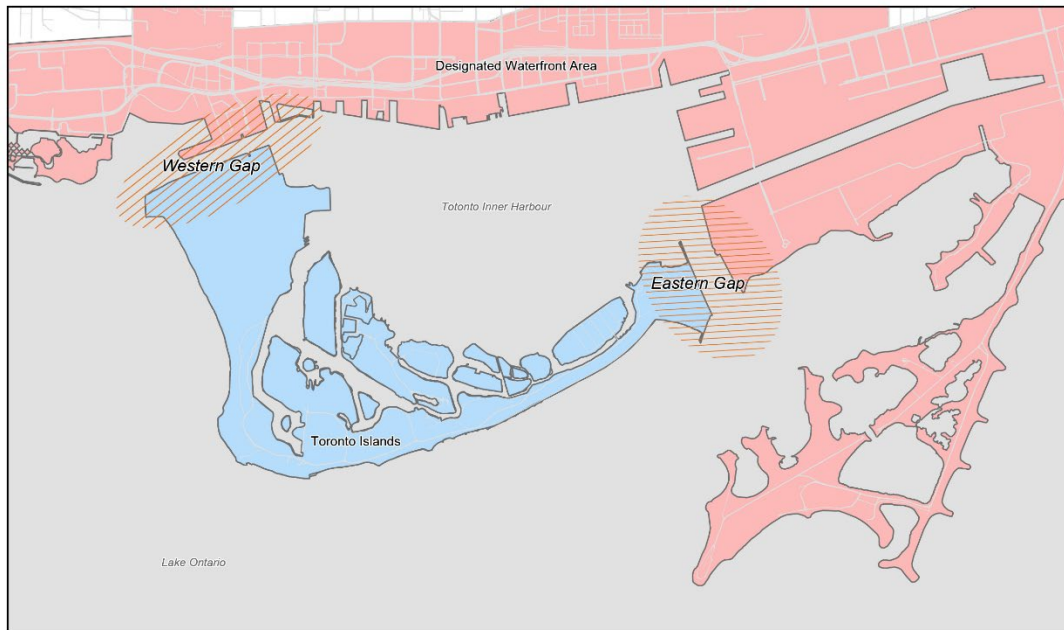
Attachment 2: Enlarged Aerial View of Eastern Gap

Attachment 3: Port Lands and Ward's Island Land Ownership Map

**Attachment 4: Environmentally Significant Areas on the Toronto Island
(Official Plan Map 12a)**

**Attachment 5: Provincially Significant Wetlands on the Toronto Island
(Official Plan Map 12b)**

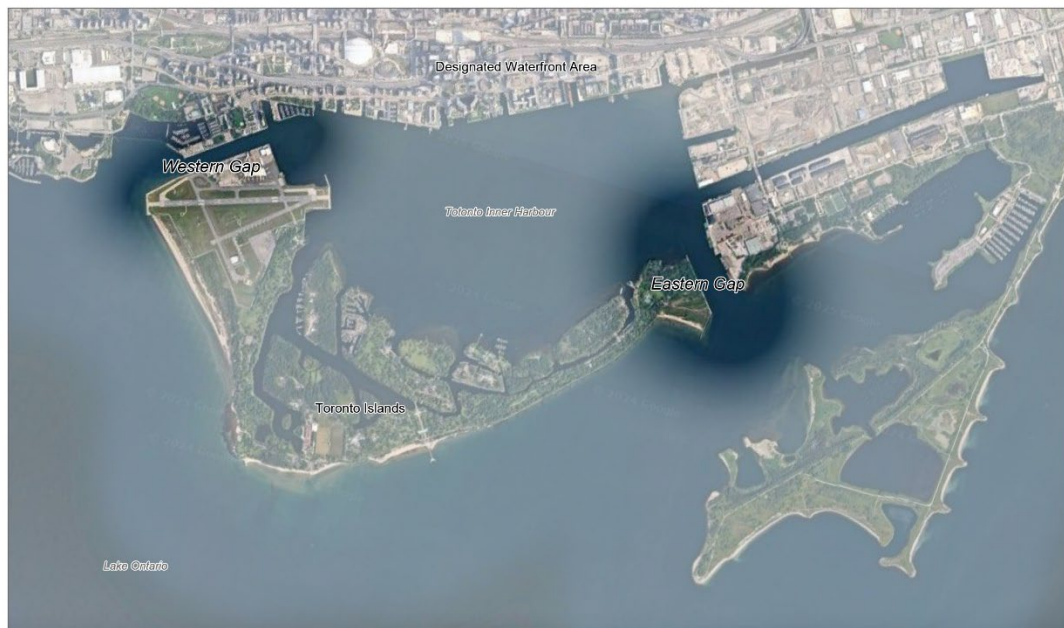
Attachment 1: Key Map & Aerial: Designated Waterfront Area and Toronto Island



Waterfront Area & Toronto Islands
Key Map

- Designated Waterfront Area
- Toronto Islands

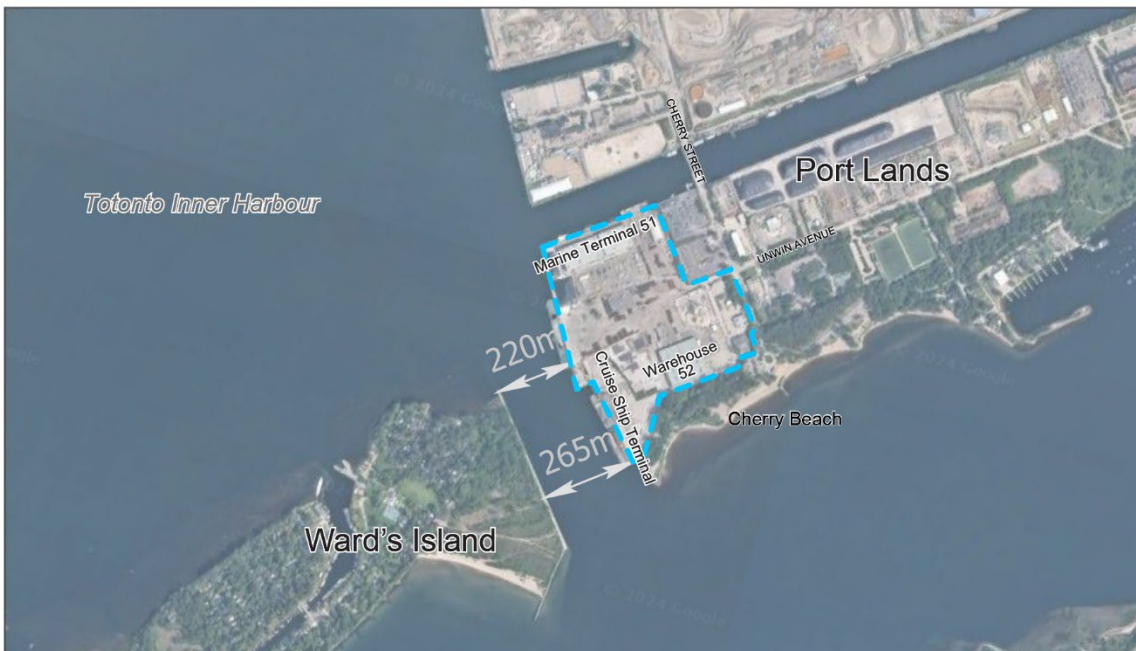
Not to Scale
Extracted: 01/08/2025



Waterfront Area & Toronto Islands
Overall Aerial Map

Not to Scale
Extracted: 01/08/2025

Attachment 2: Enlarged Aerial View of Eastern Gap



Eastern Gap, Enlarged Aerial View

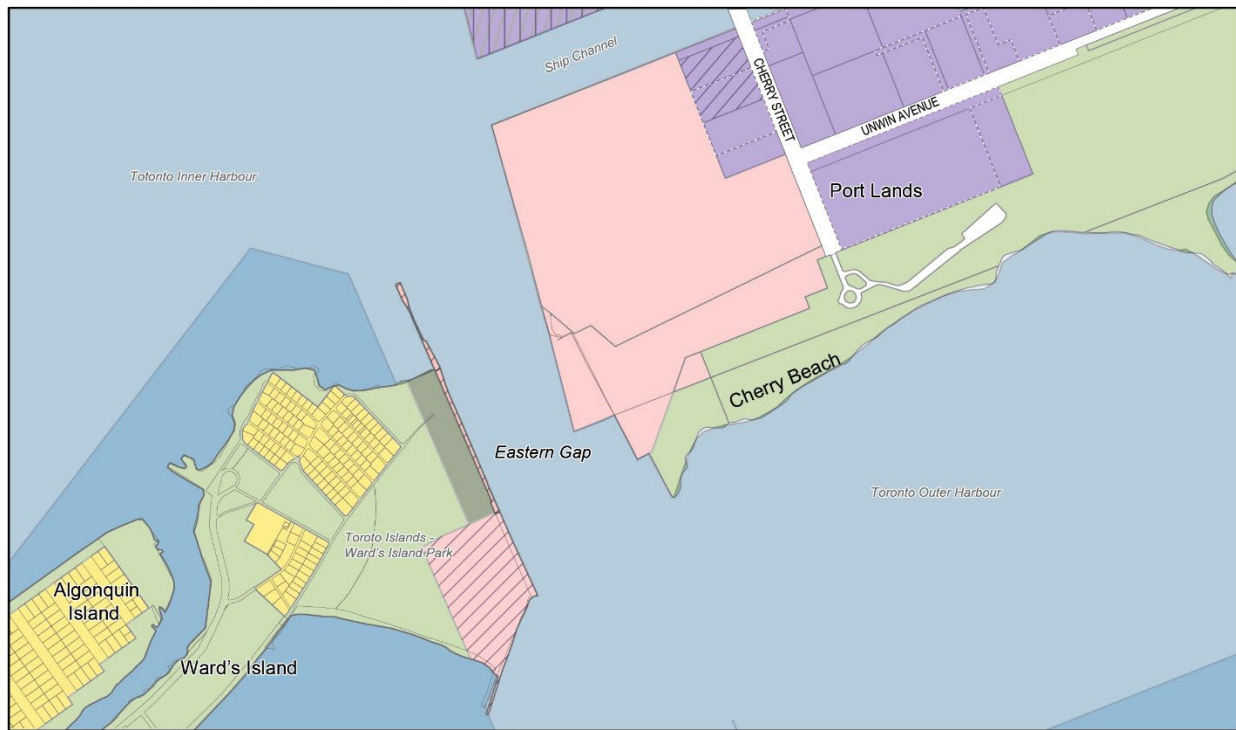


Port of Toronto - 8 Unwin Avenue



Not to Scale
Extracted: 04/23/2025

Attachment 3: Port Lands and Ward's Island Land Ownership Map



Port Lands Area & Toronto Islands
Land Ownership

| | | |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| Parkland – City | CreateTO under long-term lease | Port – PortsTO |
| Parkland – Provincial | City lands managed by CreateTO | Water Lot – PortsTO |
| Seawall, Beach, Parkland – PortsTO | CreateTO | Lake Ontario |
| Toronto Islands Residential Community Trust - Provincial | | |

Not to Scale
 Extracted: 03/10/2025

Attachment 4: Environmentally Significant Areas on the Toronto Island (Official Plan Map 12a)



**Waterfront Area & Toronto Islands
Environmentally Significant Areas Enlarged**

Environmentally Significant Areas

Source: Toronto Official Plan Map 12a

Not to Scale
Extracted: 03/11/2025



**Waterfront Area & Toronto Islands
Environmentally Significant Areas Overall**

Environmentally Significant Areas

Source: Toronto Official Plan Map 12a

Not to Scale
Extracted: 03/11/2025

Attachment 5: Provincially Significant Wetlands on the Toronto Island (Official Plan Map 12b)



**Waterfront Area & Toronto Islands
Provincially Significant Wetlands Enlarged**

Wetland

Source: Toronto Official Plan Map 12b

↑
Not to Scale
Extracted: 03/11/2025



**Waterfront Area & Toronto Islands
Provincially Significant Wetlands Overall**

Wetland

Source: Toronto Official Plan Map 12b

↑
Not to Scale
Extracted: 03/11/2025