

Fort York Integrated Operations and Heritage Stewardship Study

Date: June 19, 2026

To: Toronto and East York Community Council

From: General Manager, Economic Development and Culture Division

Wards: Ward 10, Spadina–Fort York

SUMMARY

Fort York National Historic Site (FYNHS) is a nationally significant cultural heritage asset and one of Toronto's most important archaeological sites, serving as a key destination for public programming, learning, and community use. Today, the site is owned and operated by the City of Toronto, one of 10 historic sites promoted under the moniker of Toronto History Museums.

As the surrounding area continues to intensify and evolve, the site faces increasing pressure to balance public programming and learning activations, community needs, heritage conservation, archaeological protection, public access and engagement and revenue-generating activities.

This report describes plans for an Integrated Operations and Heritage Stewardship Study for Fort York. The study will establish a comprehensive and coordinated approach to managing the site, with particular attention to compatible uses, operational requirements, community engagement, and long-term financial sustainability, while ensuring the protection of its cultural, archaeological, and commemorative integrity.

Work on the study will commence following the decommission of the FIFA Men's World Cup 2026 Fan Festival (which vacates the site at the end of July) and aims to conclude in early Q1 2027. The study will include analysis of current site conditions, substantive community engagement with the surrounding Fort York neighbourhood, engagement with Indigenous communities and key stakeholders, review of best practices, and the development of strategic options and recommendations to guide future programming, partnerships, and investment decisions.

The study will support the City's broader objectives related to reconciliation, cultural vitality, heritage conservation, and access to public space, and will provide a clear, evidence-based foundation for the long-term stewardship and sustainable operation of Fort York.

Stephen Burgess Architects (SBA) has been retained through the heritage architect roster to lead the study as they have completed work at Fort York over two decades. Their depth of experience will enable the firm to build on an established understanding of the site's heritage attributes, operational context, and stakeholder relationships, while ensuring a well-informed and contextually appropriate approach to the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The General Manager, Economic Development and Culture recommends that the Toronto and East York Community Council receive this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

The cost of undertaking the Fort York National Historic Site Integrated Operations and Heritage Stewardship Study will be \$0.100 million and will be fully accommodated within the Council-approved 2026 Capital Budget for Economic Development and Culture (EDC).

There are no additional known financial impacts resulting from the adoption of this report.

The Chief Financial Officer and Treasurer has reviewed this report and agrees with the financial impact information.

DECISION HISTORY

At its meeting on April 30, 2026, Toronto and East York Community Council directed the Director, Museums and Heritage Services to undertake a Heritage Landscape Study for Fort York National Historic Site to inform site use, event management, and opportunities to enhance the grounds, including community consultation with local stakeholders, and to report back to Community Council in July 2026 with an update.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2026.TE32.54>

In 2018, City Council adopted a framework to establish a Use Agreement between the City and The Bentway Conservancy for the use of City lands, including lands associated with Fort York National Historic Site. The agreement set out the terms, roles, and responsibilities for programming, operations, and maintenance, and authorized staff to negotiate and execute all necessary agreements to implement the arrangement.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2018.EX30.13>

In August 2010, City Council adopted, without amendment, a direction to allocate available and future Section 37 contributions and development levies from specified Fort York neighbourhood development blocks toward the construction of the Fort York

Visitor Centre. Council also requested a report back in the first quarter of 2011 on implementation progress and proposed community programming at the facility.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2010.TE36.127>

In March 2009, Toronto and East York Community Council adopted, with amendments, a direction for City Planning staff to initiate rezoning of the Fort York lands (100 Garrison Road and 800 Fleet Street) to permit a public museum, Visitor Centre, and related commercial uses. The decision also directed staff to undertake community consultation and provide the required public notice under the Planning Act.

<https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2009.TE24.112>

COMMENTS

Background

Fort York National Historic Site (FYNHS) is a designated National Historic Site of Canada and a key cultural asset of the City of Toronto. Located on lands with deep Indigenous history and significance, the site extends east to west from Bathurst Avenue to Strachan Avenue, north to south between the railway corridor and Fleet Street and Fort York Boulevard, for a total of 43 acres in downtown Toronto. The site features an 11-acre Historic Fort, 8 heritage buildings, the reconstructed Blue Barracks, a Visitor Centre, cemetery and green space. Fort York was first designated as a Heritage Conservation District in 1985 (City of Toronto By-law 420-85); in 2024, the designation was updated with an expanded district boundary (By-Law No.541-2004). FYNHS is also home to a historic military burial ground and registered cemetery dating back over 160 years.

FYNHS is operated by the Economic Development and Culture Division, with a 2026 gross expenditure budget of \$2.19 million, with approximately 65% allocated to staffing expenses. In 2025, these expenses were partially offset by revenue of \$0.875 million with 2026 budgeted revenues to remain consistent.

What was once a site on the outskirts of the small British colonial town of York, perched on the edge of Lake Ontario, is today part of one of Toronto's most densely developed areas. Since its reconstruction as a garrison following the devastation of the Battle of York in 1813, the area surrounding Fort York has undergone immense transformation. These changes include the introduction of railway infrastructure in the 1850s, the construction of the Gardiner Expressway during the 1950s and 1960s, and intensive high-rise residential development in recent decades.

The use of the site itself has also intensified. In 2014, the Fort York Visitor Centre opened at 250 Fort York Boulevard, with over 20,000 square feet of FYNHS exhibitions as well as programming and office spaces. In 2018, the Bentway Conservancy entered into a long-term lease with the City to operate on lands within Fort York National Historic Site, delivering year-round public programming, activations, and third-party rentals. Collectively, these developments have created increasingly complex relationships between the historic site and its evolving urban context.

Each year, FYNHS offers a broad range of public programming and learning opportunities for City residents and visitors alike, welcoming 152,040 visitors to the site in 2025. As a museum grounded in themes of conflict and sovereignty, its annual programs include the commemoration of the Battle of York, the Indigenous Arts Festival, Canada Day celebrations, and a Remembrance Day ceremony. General admission is free, including guided tours that connect visitors to stories of past and present, inspiring dialogues of shared futures.

FYNHS continues to serve as an important destination for public learning and engagement, cultural programming, and community use, while also advancing the City's objectives related to reconciliation, cultural vitality, heritage conservation, and access to cultural spaces.

Issue and Rationale for the Study

As the surrounding neighbourhood has been significantly reshaped by high-rise residential and mixed-use development in recent years, Fort York National Historic Site faces increasing pressure to balance heritage conservation, public programming, and revenue generation activities with evolving and sometimes disparate public and local community expectations.

At present, the site does not have an integrated framework to guide land use, programming, and investment decisions in a coordinated manner. Competing priorities, such as protecting heritage resources, and meeting the demand for outdoor space for festivals, as well as its use as green space for the neighbourhood, require a comprehensive approach to ensure the site's long-term sustainability and relevance.

The Integrated Operations and Heritage Stewardship Study is intended to address this gap by establishing a clear, strategic framework to guide the site's future stewardship and operation.

Community Profile: Fort York-Liberty Village

The Fort York–Liberty Village neighbourhood is a compact, high-density waterfront neighbourhood encompassing Liberty Village, Fort York, and Exhibition Place. The Fort York–Liberty Village neighbourhood is a distinct high-density urban node, with over double the concentration of high-rise housing and significantly higher single-person households than the rest of Toronto. Between 2016 and 2021, Fort York-Liberty Village experienced rapid growth, with its population increasing by approximately 14% (compared to ~2% city-wide) and a notably younger profile, with a mean age of 34.9 (vs. 41.2 in Toronto). As of 2021, the area remains distinct, with over half of households (53%) comprised of single-person households, significantly higher than the 33% city average, and an average household size of just 1.6 persons. The area is overwhelmingly dominated by high-density housing, with 95% of dwelling units in high-rise buildings, more than double the citywide average of 46.7%; just over half of residents (53.4%) are renters.

Residents demonstrate strong socio-economic outcomes, including a median household income of \$94,000 (vs. \$84,000 in Toronto), a labour force participation rate of 86.7% (vs. 63.9%), and a highly educated population, with nearly 70% holding a bachelor's degree or higher. However, these strengths are accompanied by elevated housing pressures, with 40% of households experiencing unaffordable housing (vs. 32.5% city-wide). Overall, Fort York represents a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse urban node characterized by a young, highly skilled population, a dense high-rise housing form, and persistent affordability challenges.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of the study is to establish a comprehensive, forward-looking framework that defines the operational and heritage stewardship priorities of the Fort York National Historic Site.

The study will:

- Identify opportunities to enhance heritage interpretation and learning;
- Support community use, cultural programming, and public access;
- Advance Indigenous stewardship and placemaking;
- Identify revenue-generating opportunities to support long-term financial sustainability; and,
- Inform future planning, programming, and operational decision-making.

The study aligns with key City strategies and priorities, including the Corporate Strategic Plan; *Culture Connects: An Action Plan for Culture in Toronto (2025-2035)*, *Sidewalks to Skylines: A 10-Year Action Plan for Toronto's Economy (2025-2035)* and The Reconciliation Action Plan. The study will also support the City's broader objectives related to cultural vitality, inclusion, and sustainable city-building.

Scope of Work

The study will be delivered through four main phases:

- *Phase 1: Indigenous Engagement, Background Review and Benchmarking* - EDC staff and the consultant team will engage with Indigenous communities at the outset, with additional points of engagement woven throughout the other phases listed below. This phase will also include a review of relevant City policies, plans, and regulatory frameworks, an assessment of heritage designations and constraints, and a review of current operations. The consultant will also undertake comparative research and benchmarking of similar heritage sites to identify best practices in site activation and management.
- *Phase 2: Site and Heritage Analysis* - This phase will involve analysis of the site's physical condition, defining heritage characteristics, landscape features, and existing infrastructure. This phase will also examine visitor movement patterns and the integration of archaeological, heritage, and Indigenous cultural

landscapes within the site. The consultant will engage with City Planning's Heritage Planning Unit on both Phases 1 and 2.

- *Phase 3: Community and Stakeholder Engagement* - The study will include a comprehensive engagement program involving local residents and other community stakeholders, including the Friends of Fort York, the Fort York Neighbourhood Association, Cityplace Fort York Business Improvement Area and the Bentway Conservancy. Engagement activities will be designed to align with City priorities and support inclusive participation.
- *Phase 4: Operational Use Options and Framework Development* - The final phase will identify an operational and heritage stewardship framework for the site, including public programming and learning, community and cultural events, public realm enhancements, and revenue-generating activities. Options will be assessed against criteria such as heritage compatibility, financial sustainability, and operational feasibility. The consultant will prepare a draft and final Study, including short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations.

Key Considerations

- Any future use of the site must respect FYNHS's status as a National Historic Site, Heritage Conservation District, and military burial ground, ensuring the protection of built, archaeological, and cultural heritage resources.
- The study will recognize the site's location on Treaty 13 lands and its longstanding significance to First Nations. The study will identify further opportunities for Indigenous leadership, stewardship, and storytelling on site.
- Public access to the site and enhancing the visitor experience will be a key focus, including addressing barriers and improving connections to surrounding neighbourhoods.
- The study will explore the optimized community use of the site, including its operation as one of the City's ten historic sites operated under the name Toronto History Museums, as well as cultural programming such festivals, events, and partnerships with cultural organizations.
- Identifying revenue-generating opportunities, such as rentals, partnerships, and tourism initiatives, will be critical to supporting the long-term sustainability of the site.

Deliverables and Timeline

The study will result in the following deliverables:

- Project work plan.
- Interim community engagement summary.
- Draft and final Integrated Operations and Heritage Stewardship Study, including framework.
- Public-facing summary document.

These deliverables will support both internal decision-making and public communication.

The study is expected to take six months to complete, with the consultant team delivering a final document to staff in the Economic Development and Culture division in Q1 2027.

Next Steps

Work on the study will commence after the FIFA Men's World Cup 2026 Fan Festival vacates the site at the end of July 2026.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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