

Re: Exhibition Place Master Plan

Summary of Advice from the Planning Review Panel, November 2, 2019

Executive Summary

The Planning Review Panel is a representative group of 32 randomly selected Torontonians that help the City Planning Division guide growth and change in Toronto. They have been asked by the Chief Planner to work together over the course of two years to provide City Planning with informed public input on major planning initiatives. Members are tasked, in particular, with helping to ensure that these initiatives are aligned with the values and priorities of all Torontonians.

Advice re: Exhibition Place Master Plan

The City Planning Division is writing a new Master Plan for Exhibition Place. The project team presented the Panel with a list of early draft ideas that might be included in the Plan and asked for the Panel's input on whether the draft ideas would make Exhibition Place an appealing destination for all Torontonians to visit. They also asked for the Panel's input on whether the City's draft plan appropriately balances the site's mixed use as a public and exhibition space.

The Panel broadly supported the project team's proposed approach of improving connections to and from the site, providing more public and green space, creating new dynamic places, and promoting a green environment. They also felt that the Plan struck a good balance between creating new public spaces and maintaining exhibition space. Panelists also strongly supported two of the City's proposed 'Big Ideas' for the site: an elevated multi-use promenade and a new gathering space.

In addition to these comments, Panelists agreed that the Exhibition Place Master Plan should:

- **Improve the site's connectivity.** Panelists felt this was the key ingredient to making Exhibition Place more of a destination for all Torontonians. Some Panelists also emphasized the need for improved on-site connectivity in all seasons and for all ages and levels of ability.
- **Emphasize year-round access.** Panelists supported this new focus on the draft plan and also suggested specific types of winter programming that could be built in, such as skating and skiing facilities.
- **Create a complete site.** Panelists proposed attractions as well as amenities that would make a day-long visit more comfortable for people of all ages; for example, greater access to food year-round, comfort stations, prayer spaces, shelters, etc.
- **Consider affordability.** While the question of affordability is largely outside the scope of the Master Plan process, Panelists commented that visitor affordability will be a key consideration for whether Exhibition Place becomes a more highly visited destination in the future. Affordability was defined by Panelists both in terms of the cost to travel to Exhibition Place, as well as the possible expense of the amenities on-site. Panelists suggested that the City consider ways to offset this possible expense, such as by subsidizing travel costs.

Detailed Summary

Melanie Melnyk and Dan Nicholson from the City Planning Division attended the Panel to present on the City's Master Plan process for Exhibition Place. City staff have been directed by Council to write a new Master Plan for the site that also aligns with emerging plans for the adjacent provincially-owned Ontario Place. Staff have been working since June to gather input from various stakeholders and the general public to inform the draft Master Plan.

Exhibition Place is a 192-acre site on the waterfront that hosts many of Toronto's most significant conventions and exhibitions. It is also home to several sports venues, including BMO Field and the Coliseum. The site has various heritage properties as well as some entertainment venues and public parkland. Exhibition Place faces challenges related to its size and location, primarily that it is not well-connected in terms of transit, cycling and pedestrian access, and feels separated from the surrounding area due to being bordered by Lake Ontario on one side and Lakeshore Blvd on the other.

The project team presented the Panel with five broad principles that they hope to accomplish in the new Master Plan:

- Removing barriers, making connections and prioritizing transit;
- Building a network of spectacular waterfront parks and public spaces;
- Promoting a clean and green environment;
- Creating dynamic and diverse new places; and
- Openness, transparency, and responsiveness to the broader community and stakeholders.

For each principle, the project team then described several specific ideas to help illustrate how these principles might be realized in the Master Plan.

The project team also sought feedback from the Panel on four 'Big Ideas'. These ideas were: 1) Enhancing the 'gateways' to the site, 2) Building an elevated multi-use promenade that would go the entire length of the site; 3) Making Exhibition Place a sustainability and innovation zone; and 4) Creating a new major gathering place.

Following this presentation, the project team posed three questions to the Panel:

1. Would the City's proposed features, elements, and 'Big Ideas' for Exhibition Place make it an appealing place for all Torontonians to visit? Why or why not?
2. What other features and elements might be missing from the plan?
3. Will this draft plan ensure an appropriate balance between providing public space and providing exhibition space? Should one be emphasized more than the other in the Master Plan?

Overall feedback

Panelists broadly supported the proposed features, elements and Big Ideas presented by the project team for Exhibition Place because they felt the proposed features would help improve access to the site and create new, interesting attractions. Panelists supported the protection of the site's exhibition spaces, but also felt that the City's draft ideas would help balance the site by improving the public spaces and amenities.

Panelists had specific feedback and additional ideas in a number of different areas.

Connectivity

All Panelists agreed that improving access to the site, particularly by transit and cycling, is a key ingredient to the revitalization of Exhibition Place.

Several Panelists also emphasized the importance of internal connectivity and accessibility throughout the site. Exhibition Place is very large and not all visitors will be able to easily walk or cycle around it. Several Panelists emphasized the importance of providing alternate means of getting around, such as shuttles or even more creative methods like cable cars. A few Panelists also suggested improving wayfinding and signage to make the site more navigable.

Affordability

A related concern of most Panelists was the overall affordability of visiting Exhibition Place. A possible consequence of improving the features of the site may be that it becomes too expensive for people to visit. Panelists suggested that while the City does not have full control over the expense of on-site businesses and amenities, that they nonetheless consider ways to build more affordability into future plans for the site, such as by offsetting travel expenses like parking and transit fare.

Year-round access

All Panelists agreed with the City's suggestion to make Exhibition Place a year-round destination. Panelists specifically suggested some potential programming elements for the winter months, including a skating area, or even an extension of the Bentway skating trail, and skiing trails or areas. Some Panelists also emphasized the need for the City to ensure the site remains navigable in winter months by staying on top of snow removal and providing ways to get around the site that are more protected from the elements.

Elevated promenade and major gathering space

Panelists supported all four 'Big Ideas' but were particularly excited about two: the elevated multi-use promenade, and the major gathering space. They felt that the gathering space in particular could serve as an 'anchor' to the rest of the site and provide good return on investment for the entire project.

A few Panelists suggested that the major gathering space should be designed flexibly to ensure it can serve multiple purposes. Panelists had specific ideas for how the site could be used, such as for a theatre or venue for the performing arts.

Creating a more complete site

All Panelists emphasized the importance of expanding the types of features and amenities on site to make it a place that people could reasonably visit for an entire day. This includes affordable food available year-round, more public washrooms, prayer space, and so on.

Additional Ideas

While not agreed upon by the entire Panel, the following ideas were also suggested by various Panelists for the City's consideration:

- **Improve the aesthetic and architectural elements of the site.** Several Panelists felt that this would help improve the visitor experience and make Exhibition Place more of a destination. Currently, the site is covered by a lot of concrete which Panelists noted is not very visually appealing much of the year. A few Panelists suggested looking for as many opportunities to green the site as possible, such as by planting more trees, especially where there are parking lots and wide open, barren spaces.
- **Incorporate safety into the design.** Safety features should be included to enable people to visit after dark, especially in the winter. Considerations should also be made for how to effectively separate the different modes of travel around the site to improve safety, especially at times when large events are taking place.
- **Find new ways to highlight the site's heritage and history.** A few Panelists noted that Exhibition Place has an interesting and unique history, and that more could be done to make that history visible to visitors through heritage interpretation and programming.
- **Find new opportunities to connect visitors to the water.** While much of this access may come via a better connection to Ontario Place, Panelists suggested that generally being able to access the water at Exhibition Place would make it a more accessible and interesting place to visit in the summer months.
- **Consider bringing back some kind of amusement park** or other child- and family-friendly attraction to broaden the appeal of the site.
- **Link on-site recreation to surrounding recreation trails.** Several Panelists suggested that in addition to creating more on-site trails for recreation, the site could be better linked to the walking and cycling trails to the east and west (the Martin Goodman Trail). This might have the effect of making Exhibition Place rating a natural start or end point for races or for people just looking to do a 'loop' around or through the site by bike or foot.
- **Introducing more climate-friendly amenities.** One Panelist suggested clean energy sources such as solar panels, green roofs, and battery walls, as well as including electric vehicle charging stations hooked up to on-site sustainable energy sources which could be used for personal vehicles and electric buses. The Panelist also suggested using repurposed shipping containers to sustainably host new on-site amenities.