



July 20, 2023

**Delivered by Email**

The Honourable Pablo Rodriguez      ([pablo.rodriquez@parl.gc.ca](mailto:pablo.rodriquez@parl.gc.ca))  
Minister of Canadian Heritage

Mayor Olivia Chow                              ([mayor\\_chow@toronto.ca](mailto:mayor_chow@toronto.ca))  
City of Toronto

Dear Minister Rodriguez and Mayor Chow:

**Re:    Concerns about the Direction of Harbourfront Centre**

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This letter is sent to you jointly by Waterfront for All, an umbrella organization of residents' and other groups concerned with the Toronto Waterfront, York Quay Neighbourhood Association (YQNA), the local residents' association in the central waterfront area, and Bathurst Quay Neighbourhood Association, the residents' association to the west.

We write out of concern for Harbourfront Centre, which we believe to be in a state of crisis, due to a lack of funding, accountability and leadership. We fear that this key federal institution, despite occupying 10 acres at the centre of the vibrant Toronto waterfront, in a key federal riding, is in a downward spiral which may lead to its ultimate collapse or closure.

It would be a disaster for local residents, the City, the arts community, and the Federal Government for Harbourfront to fall into vacancy and inactivity, as Ontario Place did approximately 10 years ago. The closure or implosion of Harbourfront would lead to a vacuum at the centre of the Toronto waterfront, hurting tourism and damaging the image of this City.

The federal government is the principal funder of Harbourfront Centre. The City of Toronto, as partial funder and landlord, is also a key stakeholder.

We suggest the appointment of a task force composed of different levels of government and members of the public, including local residents and members of the arts community, to evaluate Harbourfront's finances, leadership and direction in an open and transparent manner, including public consultation. This body should issue a public report, with recommendations as to Harbourfront's future direction.

## **What are the Problems?**

While up-to-date information seems unavailable (Harbourfront's annual financial statements for example, are not publicly available so far as we know), the available evidence suggests serious problems:

### **Lack of Consultation with the Public**

Harbourfront announced the permanent closure of its popular 38-year-old skating rink in early January 2023 due to lack of funds, without any prior notice or consultation with local residents, and despite objections from all three local elected representatives, Kevin Vuong MP, Councillor Ausma Malik, and Chris Glover MPP. The much-loved rink was the waterfront's most significant city-wide draw during winter months.

At the request of all three elected representatives, Harbourfront promised early in 2023 to set up a Community Liaison Committee to consider Harbourfront's direction. This never happened.

The Harbourfront Board meets only once a year and the meeting is closed to the public. It seems Harbourfront Centre management is not subject to any real oversight.

### **Financial Problems, Lack of Accountability**

The City of Toronto, which contributes to Harbourfront's funding, became concerned about Harbourfront's decline some years ago. A Harbourfront Centre Working Group, made up of representatives of the City and Harbourfront, was set up around 2017 to address what a City Report dated March 22, 2018 described as "key financial pressures" at Harbourfront. These included rising operating costs, historic underinvestment in facilities and equipment, an erosion of revenue sources, no significant increase in public funding, the lack of an endowment and a need to strengthen revenue from philanthropic sources. <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2018/gm/bgrd/backgroundfile-113212.pdf>

However no available information suggests the situation has improved since then. No minutes or work product of the Harbourfront Centre Working Group appear to be available to the public.

We do know that, as part of the federal government's Recovery Fund for the Arts, Culture, Heritage and Sport Sectors under the federal Budget 2021, \$20 million was awarded to Harbourfront Centre for capital infrastructure work over two years (2021-2023).

The public was told this money would be used in part to repair and upgrade the ice-skating facility. This never happened either. Instead, as set out above, the rink was ripped up without consultation. The public has been given no information as to what was done with the money.

A petition to the House of Commons in the winter of 2023 <https://petitions.ourcommons.ca/en/Petition/Details?Petition=e-4315> requested that the federal government undertake a review of its financial commitment to Harbourfront Centre and its obligations, and consult area residents on its priorities including the skating rink.

The government response to the petition was that, as an independent not-for-profit organization, Harbourfront Centre has no obligation to consult the public.

Who then is Harbourfront management accountable to, if anyone? Other public waterfront governmental entities such as Waterfront Toronto and Ports Toronto produce annual reports including financial statements and reports. Waterfront Toronto in particular has established a long track-record of public consultation. Why can Harbourfront Centre not do the same?

### **Lack of Financial Disclosure**

Harbourfront's finances continue to be opaque. The latest public information as to its financial position so far as we know is that Harbourfront's 2017 operating budget was about \$31.2 million and its deficit that year was \$2.4 million, up from \$265,000 in 2014. There were over \$15 million in deferred capital costs. As of 2018, Harbourfront owed the City about \$1.4 million in unpaid back taxes.

The size of Harbourfront's assets and liabilities or unfunded capital cost as of the present time is unknown. We are aware that Harbourfront faces the possible future loss of crucial parking income if certain parking lots are converted to parks as is planned. Various Harbourfront real estate properties such as the former PawsWay and two coffee shops have now been without significant tenants for years. The craft store in Harbourfront Centre recently closed, and a historic pedestrian bridge is also closed (Amsterdam Bridge - a gift from the City of Amsterdam).

### **Disputes, Poor Morale**

A recent publicly-visible dispute between Harbourfront management and the board of directors of arts facility Power Plant led to Harbourfront firing the entire Power Plant board of directors.

On-line workplace reviews of Harbourfront describe a "Toxic work culture with poor work-life balance. Poor management with no accountability, they are often the root of the problems, there is lots of bullying from the top down." There are frequent staff turnovers.

The quality of programming at Waterfront appears to have declined, although this is of course hard to measure. Although more people go to the waterfront than ever, they seem to be attracted by Waterfront Toronto's successful revitalization of the surrounding area and the nearby tour boats, rather than by Harbourfront Centre or its programs. There seems to be little attempt to promote Harbourfront's cultural programs.

All this suggests an organization in disarray.

### **A Task Force Should Make Recommendations**

We suggest that the federal, municipal and possibly provincial governments join forces with the public and arts organizations to consider how to revive Harbourfront Centre so it becomes a

sustainable and vigorous part of the Toronto Waterfront for years to come. Public consultations should be a key part of this process. A report should follow with recommendations as Harbourfront's future direction.

We would be pleased to meet with you or your staffs to discuss our concerns.

Yours truly,



Angelo Bertolas,  
Chair, YQNA



Edward Hore,  
Chair, Waterfront for All



Joan Prowse  
Chair, Bathurst Quay Neighbourhood Association

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