



## The City of Toronto must study in depth whether we need two airports

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The people of Toronto must decide *surprisingly soon* whether Toronto Island Airport (Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport, BBTCA) should close, or stay open. This will likely have to be decided by City Council in the next year and a half (perhaps sooner) due to the combined effect of two timelines:

1. Federal amendments to the *Canadian Aviation Regulations*, finalized in 2021, require Ports Toronto (PT), owner and operator of BBTCA, to build extensions to the runway known as Runway End Safety Areas (RESA) *by January 2027*. Its plans will likely involve extensive lakefill. In 2021, PT estimated the cost of RESAs at \$50 million to \$130 million. No bank will loan PT that amount unless it is clear that BBTCA will exist for many decades to repay the loan.
2. However, the Tripartite Agreement of 1983 (between the City, the predecessor of PT, and the federal Ministry of Transport), permitting the existence of BBTCA, *expires in 2033* with no provision for renewal. In order to get the financing to build RESA by the 2027 deadline, PT recently asked the City to agree to extend the Tripartite Agreement past 2033, probably for 50 more years (how long an extension PT wants is not yet publicly known).

In other words, to meet its January 2027 deadline to build RESA which is necessary if BBTCA is to stay open, PT needs City Council to agree to extend the Tripartite Agreement past 2033 *in the very near future*. Both construction of RESA and extension of the Tripartite Agreement require the formal consent of the City as part-owner of the airport lands.

So far as we know, Ports Toronto has not yet sent the City any detailed proposal or plans.

The City should devote considerable resources to examining the issues, and set up a robust public consultation process.

## **City Staff's upcoming report will outline a process to decide**

The City's Waterfront Secretariat, the department responsible for waterfront-related issues, is now preparing a report for Executive Committee of City Council, setting out the issues and outlining the fact-finding and public consultation process that Staff believe City Council will need in order to make a well-informed decision. That report is expected to be made public and go before the Executive Committee in late Q2 or Q3, 2024.

## **Does Toronto need two airports, one small?**

Maybe not. After fully looking into it, City Council could decide not to agree to an extension of the Tripartite Agreement past 2033, nor allow RESAs to be built. BBTCA would then no longer comply with federal safety requirements as of January 2027 and would presumably close. Here are some factors which might influence the City's decision:

- Waterfront population density has massively increased since 1983, increasing the adverse health, traffic, noise, and environmental impacts of BBTCA;
- UP Express, a direct rail link between Union Station and Pearson International Airport ("Pearson"), opened in 2015;
- Use of BBTCA has declined;
- Porter Airlines, the principal airline tenant at BBTCA, has already moved a substantial portion of its business to Pearson;
- BBTCA appears not to be economically viable. According to Porter, the cost of operating there is about three times higher than at Pearson. Commercial jets are not permitted. The short runway limits the destinations served;
- There may be better alternative uses of the 210 acres on Toronto Island occupied by BBTCA. The City's Official Planning documents state that the airport lands should "revert to a park or a mix of park and residential uses should the airport close."

Downtown Toronto lacks parks and green space considering its density. There is a notorious housing shortage. Alternative uses of the airport must be fully explored by City Staff, and compared with the benefits and costs of keeping the airport open.

## **The City must carefully examine the facts. This is the time**

Council's decision on the future of the airport lands will affect the city for at least sixty years. The City should devote the time and resources needed to examine the issues fully, regardless of any deadline PT may have.

On October 24, 2023, Waterfront for All submitted a [memorandum](#) “Does Toronto Need Two Airports” outlining the questions it believes the City Staff’s upcoming report to Executive Committee should recommend be studied. They include:

**RESAs:** What would potential RESA extensions look like? What environmental impacts would they have? Would they affect boating and or enjoyment of the Harbour? How long would they take to build? How would they be financed? How would their high cost affect the economic viability of BBTCA?

**Public consultations on the future of the Airport:** What form would they take? Who would conduct them?

**Alternative uses:** What are the alternative uses of the airport lands? Might some or all of the existing buildings be repurposed? What large-scale park amenities are possible? What is the feasibility of “residential uses” in some combination with park use, as contemplated in the planning documents? Are there models in other cities that may be instructive, eg Granville Island in Vancouver, Navy Pier or Meigs Field in Chicago, former airfields at Tempelhof or Tegel in Berlin etc.

**Transportation efficiency:** Study is required of who uses the airport, why, and where are they going? What percentage of the population of the GTA benefits from BBTCA, and to what extent? How many travellers save how much time travelling within the city if BBTCA exists, versus a scenario where airport travel is consolidated at Pearson?

**Economic benefits:** Do the supposed economic benefits of BBTCA such as additional travellers to the City, more tourist spending or jobs in fact continue to exist if airport travel is consolidated at Pearson? Any true economic benefits must of course be weighed against downside impacts.

**Lost opportunity costs:** Assuming finite resources to spend on aviation infrastructure, are resources best spent at BBTCA, or at Pearson or elsewhere where the same dollar investment may benefit more travellers? What costs are there to the public and the City if other options for the airport lands such as park, or a combination of residential uses and park, are not pursued?

**Long term viability of BBTCA:** Why is usage of BBTCA decreasing? If Porter leaves or simply uses it less, might BBTCA become a white elephant?

**Health and safety:** BBTCA is close to Toronto Island Park, the Harbour, busy waterfront recreational areas, a school, and a residential neighbourhood. It lacks the buffers such as empty grassland and industrial buildings that an airport of its size would normally have. What are the health effects of BBTCA on the surrounding area? For example, an Air Quality Study in the Bathurst Quay Neighbourhood conducted by the University of Toronto, in partnership with

Toronto Public Health, City of Toronto Planning Department and Ports Toronto, finalized in January, 2024, examined impacts from operations at BBTCA on the health of people nearby.

What are the health and safety implications of commercial airplanes operating for decades in future close to ever-increasing density, and more and higher condominium and other towers?

What are the impacts of BBTCA-related Object Limitation Surfaces (OLS), that is, take-off and landing routes that must be free of obstructions under aeronautical regulations, on permitted building development heights at the east end of the harbour?

As aeronautic safety standards become stricter, are intrusive safety-related measures other than RESA likely to be mandated in the future eg approach lighting in Toronto Harbour?

**Fiscal impact on City:** BBTCA pays no rent on the City land it occupies, and taxes well below other commercial taxpayers. What are the fiscal consequences of keeping BBTCA open versus other possible scenarios?

**Impact on waterfront revitalization:** The City, other levels of government, and many private parties have invested billions of dollars in waterfront revitalization. What is the impact of the continued existence of BBTCA on the many aesthetic and economic benefits of the revitalized waterfront, compared with other possible uses of the airport lands?

**Noise, traffic, effect on wildlife:** These were identified as impacts of BBTCA to be investigated in an extensive report prepared by City Staff at the time of the Porter proposal to expand the airport for jets, "Request to Amend the Tripartite Agreement for Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport", November 21, 2013. Have these improved or got worse? What new information is available?

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