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Let's not be waterfront wannabes

By Marcus Gee

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Chicago's famous 'front lawn' is great, but dynamic new plans for east harbour also spell success

When Toronto compares itself to Chicago, it suffers from waterfront envy. Torontonians who visit the Windy City often marvel at the swath of parkland that graces its Lake Michigan edge. Why can't Toronto do something like that?

But imitating Chicago's waterfront would be a mistake. As the latest news from down by the water shows, Toronto is trying something altogether different. The result should be a waterfront that in its own way is every bit as successful as Chicago's.

Last week a group of developers struck a deal to buy a 5.54-hectare chunk of property at the east end of the downtown waterfront, just west of Cherry Street and south of the Gardiner Expressway. Home Depot originally planned to build a big-box store on the site. It dropped the idea after a public uproar and a negative decision from the Ontario Municipal Board. After sitting on the land for a decade, it decided to sell.

The new owners plan a mixed-used development - condos, offices, stores - that will transform the barren patch of land into a vibrant urban neighbourhood overlooking the harbour. Construction could start in three or four years.

The development is the latest in a string of exciting changes on the eastern end of the harbour. Just to the north of it, the West Donlands community is starting to emerge, anchored by the future Athletes Village for the 2015 Pan Am Games. Just to the west, the so-called East Bayfront is taking shape, with new office buildings, classrooms, shopping, apartments and condos.

Most Torontonians are still only vaguely aware that this is happening. Once they see all the construction, many will object. Memories of what happened around Harbourfront years ago still colour every debate about the waterfront. After a series of unattractive condos sprang up, many residents complained that the city was being cut off from the harbour by a wall of ugliness. No one wants that to happen again - and it won't.

We have learned from the Harbourfront experience. Everything that goes up on the waterfront now has to go through design panels, environmental officials and planning approvals. To preserve harbour views, the buildings going up in East Bayfront will be arranged like a staircase, with the lower buildings by the water and the taller ones further back next to the Gardiner.

The whole area will be fronted by a tree-lined promenade so that people have direct access to the water. Two creative new parks, Sugar Beach and Sherbourne Park, provide still more open space.

"It's not our hope to block the waterfront but to open it up," says Jane Gol, president of Continental Ventures Realty, one of the developers of the Home Depot property.

What emerges will be far better than a sprawling waterfront park, swept by winter winds half the year. What we will get instead is a dynamic living community, open to the water but also tied into busy downtown scene. "If anything the waterfront needs more people. It needs life," says Sam Crignano, president of the Cityzen Development Group, which is working with Ms. Gol's Continental and with Castlepoint Realty Partners.

Chicago's waterfront is the product of another era. City fathers decided in the mid-19th century to leave the land east of Michigan Avenue "public ground, forever to remain vacant of buildings." The eventual result was the grand expanse of Grant Park, with its fountains, walking trails, softball fields and, most recently, the Frank Gehry-designed band shell of Millennium Park.

It's a wonderful and heavily used public space, often known as downtown Chicago's front lawn. But Toronto already has its waterfront green space: the Toronto Islands. For a growing city in the early 21st century, it makes more sense to build a truly urban waterfront where people come to live and work as well as play.