

# How Mississauga's waterfront got ahead: by learning from Toronto's mistakes

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Within a generation, a huge swath of industrial land on Lake Ontario will be transformed: Canals will run alongside streets with sidewalk cafes; mid-rise condominiums will put the neighbourhood's urban design head and shoulders over the forest of impersonal glass towers sprouting elsewhere across Greater Toronto; a deep-water heating-and-cooling system will use the nearby lake to cut the area's [carbon emissions](#).

It sounds like something a metropolis such as Toronto might plan for redeveloping its derelict port lands, but this is actually Mississauga's vision for the site of the former Lakeview Generating Station east of Cawthra Road.

While Mayor Rob Ford and his allies cast aspersions on both the city's strategy of using public investment to transform the lakefront into a series of urban, mixed-use communities and on Waterfront Toronto, the agency charged with implementing it, Mississauga is lauding that very model and seeking to emulate it.

What's more, the suburban city believes it can learn from Toronto's weaknesses to get development done faster and avoid some of the eyesores that have plagued the larger city.

"Their entire process took so long, developers got applications in before the plans were in place," says Jim Tovey, a long-time advocate of the project, elected to Mississauga city council last year. "While Toronto was talking about making a great waterfront, they were destroying it."

Meanwhile, in Oshawa, the city is counting on government-funded improvements to the harbour and the re-opening of an abandoned marina to spur private development in the area.

## **Public v. private model**

For most of the city's early existence, Toronto's inner harbour was given over to industrial activity. After the shipping industry declined and factories de-camped to the suburbs in the mid-20th century, the area languished as governments both federal and local put forward different plans that were never fully implemented.

"There were significant land-ownership problems – various government departments and agencies owned different pieces of land," says Gabriel Eidelman, a University of Toronto graduate student researching the history of the area. "There were disputes between the city and the [federal government](#) over a single acre."

For instance, while the federal government wanted to put parks along the central waterfront, the arms-length Harbour Commission sold a piece of its land to a private developer, which built a high-rise condominium and hotel, the Harbour Castle Hilton, at the water's edge, creating a wall in front of the lake.

The city's Olympic bids in the 1990s and 2000s finally provided the impetus for different levels of government to end haphazard development. In 2001, they created Waterfront Toronto, a joint federal-provincial-municipal body charged with overseeing the area. Its model is a sort of public-private partnership: While government builds infrastructure, creates parks and develops a vision for the area, private developers build condominiums and office buildings to fill in the neighbourhood. These projects are all governed by the plans that Waterfront Toronto has put in place, ensuring that developers don't build a tower too tall or create an ugly streetscape.

The overall plan for redeveloping Toronto's waterfront was part of what attracted Jane Gol, president of Continental Ventures, a New York-based firm partnering with Canadian companies to develop the old Home Depot site on the waterfront.

“It appeared to us that it's a very viable development neighbourhood,” said Ms. Gol, who also recently served on New York's planning commission, which is overseeing the regeneration of parts of that city's waterfront. “This is a great initiative to restore the waterfront history of cities.”

Waterfront Toronto has made tangible progress over the last decade, opening new parks and the area's first commercial building last year. A George Brown College campus is set to be completed next year, while private developers are planning condominium projects for both the east end of the inner harbour and the West Don Lands to the north.