

# Keys to the City:

At the end of 2003's hard-fought and uncharacteristically animated civic election campaign, Toronto mayoral candidate David Miller won the keys to the city, largely on a pledge to reverse a City Council decision to construct a bridge to the city's downtown island airport. Miller, whose campaign until then had been lagging behind that of front-runner and ex-mayor Barbara Hall, immediately took the risky position that the bridge and the process by which it had been agreed upon represented everything that was wrong with civic decision-making, and stressed the incongruity between the airport expansion and nascent plans to 'revitalize' the waterfront by transforming it into a residential and recreational showcase.

The Toronto Port Authority, which manages the sleepy little airstrip on an island 120 meters off the shore of Toronto's central waterfront, had hoped to reverse years of money-losing operations by overcoming what it thought to be the airport's biggest detraction: the only means of public access is a five minute ferry ride. In June 2003, City Council had agreed and passed a motion to allow construction of the bridge. Miller called the decision and the bridge: 'irrational', 'a boondoggle' and 'highly speculative.'

Reflecting back on the election, the president of the federal NDP said, "The bridge is symbolic. It speaks to the whole agenda of cities and how the cities want to have control of their own destinies." And following her loss, Barbara Hall was reported to have muttered, "That damn bridge."

David Miller's 2003 mayoral election victory not only indicates that the waterfront has become, if not materially then certainly symbolically, central to his term of office, but also demonstrates how waterfront quays have become places with strategic political, economic, environmental and social value. The waterfront was central to Miller's election victory and – contrary to the continuing complaint that 'there's nothing happening on the waterfront' – has played a major role in city, regional and even national politics throughout his first term of office. The waterfront has become critical for wealth accumulation processes, and control of these processes is a major concern. Cities have long been recognized as prominent agglomerations in economic processes of production and reproduction and, at this particular historical juncture, waterfronts are one of the main sites where this occurs.

Despite its importance for wealth creation, the waterfront has yet to become prominent in this year's civic campaign. While no issues have been particularly controversial in the campaign thus far, the relative quiet on the waterfront issue has resulted from a wide-ranging consensus that has been constructed around both the form and the process by which the waterfront is to be revital-



ized. This is not to say that many inter-jurisdictional and inter-organizational squabbles do not exist — they do and have given rise to interesting, but largely diversionary, public debates (see our January 2006 Relay article) and caused significant delays in planning and development.

However, the over-arching waterfront 'vision', constructed by those who stand to benefit the most from its realization, has won enthusiastic support from politicians of all political stripes. And media pundits, the self-proclaimed guardians of the public trust, continue to fill many column-inches asking why it's not happening fast enough but not challenging the waterfront development 'vision' itself. Where are the voices demanding a diversity of well-paid employment opportunities on the waterfront? Where are the demands for enough truly affordable housing to provide for those without homes and the working poor? What's happened to meaningful environmental protection and enhancement projects – and not just sustainability rhetoric serving the interests of de-

# Waterfront Development in Toronto

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velopers? In this article, we intend to critically examine the dominant waterfront development vision in order to show why these alternatives and others should be demanded from those who seek to lead the city after November's election.

## THE VISION: AN ECONOMICALLY COMPETITIVE WATERFRONT

The dominant vision for Toronto's waterfront is based on a narrative which asserts that cities around the world have entered into an increasingly aggressive and competitive battle to attract the movers and shakers of the knowledge-based global economy. According to a City of Toronto report, *Our Toronto Waterfront! The Wave of the Future* "we live in a highly competitive world where entrepreneurs, skilled workers and innovative companies gravitate to cities that offer the best quality of life", therefore, we must work hard to attract the investment and people that are critical to the emerging knowledge-based economies.

Former Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC) Chair and recently deposed 'waterfront czar' Robert Fung summarized this position, stating quite boldly that "meeting the challenge and requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy is the rationale behind the revitalization of Toronto's waterfront."

Waterfront development, according to this carefully crafted rhetoric, is the new urban panacea for everything from environmental degradation and economic stagnation to the historic disconnect between the city and the lake. But the large-scale transformation of urban space is to be undertaken in such a way and in such a form that the best and brightest knowledge-economy capitalists will take up residence in Toronto, bringing with them not only their entrepreneurial spirit and corporate headquarters but also the possibility, no matter how remote or how far down they trickle, of new jobs and new economic opportunities for Torontonians. This requires a new emphasis on an urban form that provides 'quality of life'.

Organized under the green-tinted rubric of the TWRC's Sustainability Framework and including such seemingly pluralist benefits as 'diversity', 'creativity', and 'community', this "high quality of life," as Fung has said, is clearly framed as "a competitive advantage" which will allow Toronto "to prosper in a global market."

With its vast tracts of largely 'underutilized' and, more importantly, publicly-owned land, Toronto's waterfront is the optimal location for this urban transformation. And this vision is, says the TWRC, a sure-fire winner since so many world-class cities

have already used it and – despite critical analysis to the contrary – have garnered economic, social and cultural success.

The public sector's role, according to this approach, is to spark a 'virtuous cycle' of development by making several strategic, foundational investments. Public dollars will be invested in new infrastructure – transportation facilities, water-related parks and public spaces, flood control, cleaning up contaminated sites and 'renaturalizing' degraded wildlife habitat – on nearly 2000 acres of largely publicly-owned waterfront land. But the actual work of strategically investing public funds has been given over to the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation – a tripartite creature of the city, the province and the federal government intended to exploit a wide range of public powers to advance a profit-driven model, overseeing a \$17-billion redevelopment project over 30 years using an initial public-sector infrastructure investment of \$1.5 billion.

Once improved, this prime waterfront land will be sold to the private sector, which will purportedly develop 40,000 new residential units and 7.6 million square feet of commercial space targeted to the needs of knowledge-economy sectors as well as a variety of 'destination' entertainment facilities to service the international tourism market. In effect, this massive public expenditure – in both money and lands – is intended to produce gigantic private development profit from structures built for elites, with 'trickle-down' benefits for everyone else.

The translation of this dream-like vision into concrete reality has, however, run into many of the tensions inherent in accumulation processes, relating particularly to less-than-enthusiastic support from private sector investors, stressful interpersonal relations and jealousies, rival government agencies jockeying for institutional supremacy, and conflicts with civil society groups. In an effort to overcome these tensions and fulfill the economic promise of waterfront development, Toronto's elites are once again looking to engage the purported catalytic impact of one of this city's most sought after – but consistently unobtainable – prizes, the global mega-event. This time around, their object of desire is the 2015 World's Fair.

## EXPO 2015: A GLOBALIZING STRATEGY FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

Not long after Miller's mayoralty victory in 2003, as jurisdictional squabbles intensified and prospects for the TWRC's development project seemed increasingly uncertain, a small group of Toronto's place entrepreneurs – apparently blessed by →

Mayor Miller – searched for another approach to move Toronto's fortunes forward. As with bids for the 1996 and 2008 Olympic Games and applications for the World's Fairs of 1998 and 2000, this group has been using the pursuit of global mega-events as a strategy to promote development on the waterfront.

The Expo 2015 bid, as its proponents plainly admit, is yet another attempt to use an externally mandated and regulated event to determine urban development policy for the city, intended to force competing agencies and organizations to work together, attract vast sums of private sector investment, and deliver billions in economic benefits to business in the city.

In a *Toronto Star* editorial on May 8 2006, they write: "Winning the right to host Expo 2015 would prove a tremendous boon to the economy and international image of Toronto. A strong and smart bid for the world's fair could be the catalyst to spark waterfront renewal, refurbish public transit, provide jobs and attract millions of tourists....Local Expo advocates have done their homework. They present a compelling case for having Toronto welcome the world. We deserve our turn to shine and 2015 is the year to do it."

Using a mega-event such as the World's Fair as a prime element in the city's urban development policy is fraught with dangers and should be rejected. Staging Expo 2015 will be the responsibility of a relatively small group of private and non-profit organizations whose decisions are largely beyond the control of elected governments. It is these interests that will be determining public policy and not those of the broad spectrum of people in the city. As such, we expect that hosting Expo will be used for the following: establishing and justifying exceptional measures that alter the city's plans and practices, creating projects that are poorly integrated into broader development plans for the city, diverting local-democratic participatory traditions in the name of getting the job finished on time, enforcing a mean-spirited and punitive approach to non-conformity, and accentuating socioeconomic polarization within the city through the workings of real estate markets.

Furthermore, hosting Expo will require cooperation not only with provincial and federal governments, but also with regulatory bodies, multi-national corporations and other governments from around the world. To have a successful Expo requires coopera-



tion and collaboration to gain support from these bodies. Such support will likely be achieved by compromising Toronto's development patterns to correspond with the interests of global actors. But it is not only altered development patterns that will be problematic, it is also that local political structures will be reorganized and power relations reconfigured. From such a process, we expect that the powers of local decision-makers (politicians, business people as well as community representatives) would be greatly reduced and that Toronto's future will be greatly influenced by demands from global actors. Such a process of rushed globalization in the name of temporary economic benefits and infrastructure legacies will surely not be to the benefit of a broad range of Torontonians.

### SEEKING ALTERNATIVES: ELECTION 2006

The upcoming November 2006 mayoralty election provides an important opportunity to re-think what should be happening with Toronto's waterfront. In 2003, Miller won the keys to the city through a bold move that swept away years of special-interest back-room dealings. But his unqualified support for Expo 2015 as an urban waterfront development policy – indeed, his continued endorsement and promotion of the entire competitive vision for the waterfront – simply reproduces the politics of special interest development that is increasingly polarizing the city and concentrating power and privilege into the hands of the downtown development elite.

The quays of the city should benefit those Torontonians who reside outside of the traditional power structures, those Torontonians for whom international investment in the construction of spectacular cityscapes and the promotion of knowledge-based economies only reinforces their disenfranchisement and powerlessness. It's important to have an active waterfront, but also an activist City Council which sees socioeconomic equality – not globalized trickle-down economic development policy – as both its responsibility and its goal. **R**

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