

# Toronto awaits Doug Ford's plans for Ontario Place

By **DAVID RIDER** City Hall Bureau Chief  
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The City of Toronto does not know what the Ford government is planning for Ontario Place but expects to be included in any waterfront redevelopment discussions, says Mayor John Tory.

Tory raised the issue with Premier Doug Ford on Aug. 4 during the Caribbean Carnival grand parade at city-owned Exhibition Place, which is adjacent to provincially owned Ontario Place.



Ontario Place, a wholesome theme park, was shut down in 2011 amid concerns about attendance and costs. (RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR)

“I said to (Ford) one of the many things we have to talk about is this precinct,” the mayor said in an interview Friday. “I said I always believed it would be best if we could find some way to have a co-ordinated plan, because it is effectively one part of the city or one neighbourhood, but (Ontario Place and Exhibition Place) happen to be under different ownership.

“I said I hope we can talk about that and he said, ‘Yeah, we really should. It’s important.’”

The pair were back at the site Aug. 17 for the opening of the Canadian National Exhibition, where Ford told the crowd: “I’m proud to announce we’re going to work in conjunction with the CNE, redo Ontario Place and make it the most spectacular destination anywhere in North America to visit.

“We’ll bring it back to life.”

The Star [reported Thursday](#) that Ford has taken a personal interest in redevelopment plans and is expected to launch an international competition to rethink the sprawling green space along Lake Shore Blvd. W. A spokesman for Tourism Minister Sylvia Jones would only say: “We will have more to say on Ontario Place in the future. Stay tuned!”

Tory, who, in 2012, before he became mayor, wrote a [provincially commissioned report](#) with recommendations for the future of shuttered Ontario Place, said Friday it makes sense for both governments to work together.

When the Star noted Ford's move to [cut the size of Toronto city council](#) in mid-election without input from the city, Tory said he would fight any "aggressive" move by Ford to make unilateral decisions about the future of Exhibition Place.

"I would be very upset by that, but I'm not going to presume negative things at all," Tory said.

Redevelopment "has to be done in a collaborative, co-operative and consultative matter, and any attempt to do otherwise will be met with strong resistance," he said. Exhibition Place "is a place that belongs to the people of the city of Toronto and should be treated as such," he said.

Ontario Place, a wholesome theme park, was shut down in 2011 amid concerns about attendance and costs. Tory's 2012 report envisioned "a new public backyard" with condos on the west island, a hotel or resort — but no casino — and corporate headquarters or an educational research institute.

The mayor, who is running for re-election, says now the residential component was included only to satisfy revenue requirements. Torontonians have said "loud and clear" they don't want a casino on that site or anywhere downtown, he added.

Ken Tanenbaum, vice-chairman of Kilmer Van Nostrand Co. Ltd, led a proposal to redevelop Ontario Place's west island. It was submitted to Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government. It included university and cultural uses, parkland, an entertainment venue and commercial retail.

The call for proposals stipulated no residential development, no casinos, continued public ownership of land and permanent public access to the water's edge. Innovation, arts and culture were among desired redevelopment goals.

Tanenbaum, whose father Larry Tanenbaum chairs both Kilmer Van Nostrand and Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, was notified shortly before the June provincial election that the process was on hold.

The Progressive Conservative government is expected to launch a new competition.

"My expectation is the current government has a very different set of objectives for the site, which we'll be very interested in seeing and responding to. We're keenly interested in Ontario Place," Tanenbaum said. "I expect this government will want to put its own stamp on it."

Under the previous process, Jennifer Keesmaat, Toronto’s former chief planner who is running against Tory in the mayoral election, was hired on a short contract by Infrastructure Ontario to evaluate bids.

She said the waterfront is vitally important to Toronto and any changes to Ontario Place and Exhibition Place need “new pedestrian connections, a new waterfront (light rail line) and should look at it as a new masterplanned area.

“This is a really critical cluster of public uses and public spaces and there shouldn’t be any blurring of public spaces and private spaces,” she said in an interview.

“Ontario Place looms large in my imagination as a place families went, and, moving forward, that needs to be the priority.”

Ric Amis of the Parkdale Residents Association said his group wants a master plan for Ontario Place and Exhibition Place and for nearby residents to have a say in developing it.

“We’re all desperately in need of green space and the two sites are (a total of) 347 acres — that’s a big chunk of land that’s underutilized,” Amis said. “[Hotel X](#) (at Exhibition Place) has a 99-year lease. It’s not a sale, but it certainly feels like one.

“Our key phrase is keep public lands in public hands.”

David Rider is the Star's City Hall bureau chief and a reporter covering Toronto politics. Follow him on Twitter: [@dmrider](#)

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