

Friends of the Spit

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its presence on
the Spit?

@ We need your email address @

At the end of June, an email with the subject "Articles about the Spit", (published in NOW Magazine) was sent to members on our email list. If you did not receive this message, it means we do not have your current email address (a number of messages were returned as "user unknown"). It is extremely important that we have your email address — it will never be sold or traded, and it will not appear on messages sent to others. Please email your address to fos@interlog.com.

The Newsletter and mailings remain our main tools of communication with members. When time is pressing, however, we have to use email.

NEWSLETTER

Fall 2005

AS AN EDITORIAL

What is the Spit? First and foremost, it is an island of green, an escape from the busy city.

It is a place of freedom — from noise, car fumes, traffic, crowds, visual pollution, and regimentation. A place where you can observe wildlife, but more importantly, where you coexist with it in a seamless way. A place with no admission fees.

Down the road, will we have to say: "It was a place of freedom..."? Sadly, the day may come when the relaxed wanderer enjoying things as they come is replaced by the purposeful exhibit tourist, when the adventurous families are replaced by participants in "planned activities", when individualistic birders are replaced by continuing education classes in birdwatching, when the rock-sitting picnicker is replaced by the table-sitting fast-food eater, and when the informal, self-propelled visitors are replaced by busloads of tourists following the guide.

Protecting the Spit as a refuge for present and future generations of urban explorers is our mission. If we fail, Toronto will have lost an extraordinary opportunity to offer its citizens an island of tranquillity unmatched in any large urban centre.

Welcome new members!

Media reports that Parks Canada was eyeing the Spit as the site for its Discovery Centre have sparked an influx of new members.

"I go to the Spit regularly, to enjoy the tranquillity. I don't want to see it built up. I am now joining to help protect it", said one individual who sounded both angry and determined. WAY TO GO!

Parks Canada still determined to build on the Spit

Discovery Centre update

Over the summer, as part of its feasibility study of a Discovery Centre in Toronto, Parks Canada held a number of meetings to "sell" building it on the Spit to the community. Overwhelmingly, the idea of putting this facility on the Spit was rejected by people who visit and love the Spit as an informal wilderness. While a number of people were interested in the concept of a Discovery Centre, they did not want it located on the Spit.

Parks Canada's mandate is to locate its Discovery Centre within Lake Ontario Park (i.e. between Cherry and Leslie Streets). However, it is concentrating exclusively on four locations on the Spit, with its preferred site well onto the Spit near the control booth. This is extremely disturbing. A facility of this size would be detrimental to the Spit, to its unique atmosphere, and to the many people who rely on the Spit for relief from the stresses of city living.

In its presentation, more notable for the enthusiasm of its delivery than for its awareness of the Public Urban Wilderness nature of the Spit, Parks Canada described an environmental wonderland where learning about the environment and appreciating nature are taught through exhibits, observation stations, and internet links to National Parks and other sites.

In its own words, Parks Canada intends to "peel-back the landscape" (translation: dig a huge hole) to "insert" a building containing a variety of displays (see box). It waxed lyrical about "your hair blowing in the wind" as you are touring the Spit aboard a vehicle, "kids being grossed out" observing the garter snakes in the hibernaculum through a webcam, children "composing music by recording birdsongs"...

Many grave concerns

In essence, what Parks Canada is bringing to Toronto is money. Lots of it. And so many agencies involved in waterfront revitalization, including the Toronto Waterfront

(Article continues over)

What is a Parks Canada Discovery Centre?

A project to build centres in major cities to inform city-dwellers about Canada's National Parks and natural environment. So far, there is one in operation in Hamilton. The next one is planned for Toronto — with the intention of putting it on the Spit. The following is a brief theoretical overview of the one Parks Canada wants to build on the Spit. Note that data is approximate and incomplete.

- Size:**
- Main building: 20,000-30,000 square feet (contains a "Great Hall")
 - Satellite facilities throughout the Spit
 - Bus and car parking lots, and access roads
- Access:**
- Motorized transport (maybe using renewable energy)
- Exhibits and activities:**
- Canada's National Parks
 - Famous Torontonians and Canadians
 - Internet access to National Parks sites
 - Wildlife viewing through webcams
 - Recording bird songs. Arts and crafts

Approximately 90% of exhibits are not Spit-specific

- Facilities:**
- Restaurant/snack bar
 - Potential rental of facilities for special events, corporate meetings, concerts, etc. (as in Hamilton)
 - Signage panels throughout the Spit
- Fees:**
- Costs are user-supported. Admission is charged

A building like this on the Spit?



Hamilton Discovery Centre

Regeneration Corporation and The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), are very eager to secure a share of the federal millions. Particularly disturbing to us is the attitude of the TRCA, which so far has a creditable record of protecting the Spit against a number of damaging undertakings. The TRCA is enthusiastically welcoming the idea of a Discovery Centre on the Spit. Could it be that the prospect of getting millions of dollars is diverting the TRCA from the goal it has pursued so far?

Parks Canada dismissed the present Spit users as "recreational users", as if environmental appreciation and stewardship could not happen through the quiet enjoyment of nature but required going through a regimented "learning experience". Quietly, the Spit has nurtured respect for our environment in tens of thousands of people over nearly three decades, and will continue to do so if we Let it Be.

Making our position known

We have communicated our position to the agencies and politicians involved, including City Councillor Paula Fletcher and Federal MP Jack Layton, who represent Toronto-Danforth, the riding where the Spit is located.

It would appear that both Toronto-Danforth representatives are supportive of our position. Jack Layton, who told NOW that the Spit is one of his two favourite places in Toronto, even proposed a high-visibility site on Lakeshore Blvd. It was turned down by Parks Canada, purportedly because it was outside the boundaries of Lake Ontario Park. The site of the new (soon to be unused...?) ferry terminal at Cherry Street was also proposed. It was turned down for the same reasons.

The situation at this time

Parks Canada has told us that the feasibility study has been presented to management and is now being translated into French. It will then be tabled with Stéphane Dion, Minister of the Environment responsible for Parks Canada and Joe Volpe, as Minister Responsible for Ontario and Toronto.

The next phase

The Spit zoning designation prevents the erection of a facility such as the Discovery Centre and the attendant parking lots, roads, etc. A rezoning will have to be applied for, as well as an Official Plan amendment. Friends of the Spit and many others would oppose any rezoning and Official Plan change. It could be a long and rancorous fight.

The Spit has a Master Plan, which went through an Environmental Assessment in 1992. The Master Plan allows for a small interpretive centre. Friends of the Spit did accept that Master Plan.

Friends of the Spit's policy is to work within the political process to resolve issues. So far, our dealings with Parks Canada and the other agencies involved in the Discovery Centre have been marked by civility and mutual respect. We keep hoping that this issue will be resolved gracefully to our satisfaction (i.e. no Discovery Centre on the Spit). To that end, we continue to suggest other sites in the Portlands.

A Spit Kit is the perfect present!

Environmentally-friendly, affordable, and fun, and no trudging through malls.

The ideal introduction to the Spit: a one-year membership in Friends, a large poster, an illustrated plant guide, a bird checklist and a handy location map. All this for \$20.00—gift-wrapped!



To order, send the name, address, phone number, and email of recipients, and your name and phone number, the message for the card (gift is mailed to the recipient unless otherwise requested), and a cheque for \$20 per kit.

Also, gift memberships can be renewed or given. Cost is \$10, which includes a seasonal card.

To ensure delivery for the Holidays, your order must be received by December 14. You can also order by phone at (416) 699-3143.

GOOD NEWS...

Tree farm off the Spit

The City of Toronto Parks Department seems to have decided that the Spit is indeed not a suitable site for its tree farm. This large industrial operation will now be built elsewhere in the Portlands.

Could the opposition voiced by Friends of the Spit and other groups and the potential for a zoning battle (the present designation, Gr, permits only "conservation lands") have contributed to that decision?

TRCA increases presence on the Spit

Sometimes if you ask insistently but nicely you get what you want!

The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) has finally granted the request from Friends of the Spit and other groups to strengthen the TRCA's visible presence on the Spit.

This was made necessary as it became obvious that some individuals that were repeatedly ignoring the rules made it unpleasant for visitors and caused damage to the Spit. The request was initially rejected (see Spring 2005 Newsletter), but was subsequently approved after our representations.

During public hours, there will now be two attendants, who will be clearly identified as TRCA staff. The attendants will be trained to respond to basic queries from the public and enforce regulations. We are pleased.

...AND NOT SO GOOD

Gas plant back in the picture

The proposal to build a 550 megawatt electricity generating station fuelled by natural gas in the Portlands was derailed last Spring when the Ministry of Energy did not select it as one of its projects. The community, including Friends of the Spit, strongly objected to this project.

It seems now that it has been revived, although we have few details at the time of this writing.

Expo 2015 concerns

The City of Toronto has started community consultation on a bid for Expo 2015.

A proposed location is in the Portlands, with connection to Toronto Island.

Friends of the Spit do not endorse or reject events such as a Word Fair or Olympic Games. However, when proposed sites are close to the Spit, we have to make sure that there will be no detrimental effect nor encroachment on the Spit. We have made our concerns known to the bid committee.