

# Friends of the Spit

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BY E-MAIL

IE 22.5 Tommy Thompson Park Update

Infrastructure and Environment Committee, City of Toronto

Meeting of May 25, 2021

Comments from Friends of the Spit, May 20, 2021

Councillor J. McKelvie, Chair, and committee members,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Item IE22.5, Tommy Thompson Park Update. For 44 years now, our organization has been providing informed user-driven advocacy and commentary to all organizations with a stake in The Spit, parts of which are known as Tommy Thompson Park.

We commend the authors for a clear, concise, and thoughtful report. Overall, it is a very positive report.

We thank the City also for the acknowledgement and recognition of Friends of the Spit's decades-long advocacy for the Spit/ Tommy Thompson Park to be, and remain, a public urban wilderness.

Frankly, without Friends of the Spit's advocacy, we wouldn't be having this discussion. The Spit is unlike any other park on the Waterfront, and its history is unlike that of any other waterfront park. The Spit is what it is today because of 44 years of advocacy – first, to gain access for the public; second, to shape and support the ecological imperative of the Master Plan and EA; third, to secure the boundaries at the north to Unwin Avenue; and fourth, to see that continuing operations don't alter or whittle away the urban wilderness of the park.

Specifically, the success of The Spit is due to a strong ecological plan enshrined in the TRCA's Revised Master Plan and EA which was forged through extensive and sometimes exhaustive public consultation, coupled with specific policy initiatives – most notably no cars/ no dogs - and a clear

understanding of appropriate uses, which has led to the successful, and popular, urban wilderness we see today.

A quick note about the Revised Master Plan and EA: it is a robust document, and must continue to be the basis for all decisions. Its principles must guide all Spit/TTP decisions. Activities or installations that could be perceived as privatizing or exclusionary of the public must not be considered.

Two examples of the positive influence of our organization: first, in 1996-1997, TEDCO was set to approve an 18-acre Golf driving range at the Baselands. This disastrous proposal met with strong opposition from Friends and our allies, and was defeated 3-2 at committee level. Council then rezoned the land to Gr, its current greenspace zoning. Without our concerted efforts, these ecologically valuable woods and meadows would have been lost.

The second example is that of stewardship: Friends published the first Bird Checklist, the first Plant Checklist, and published "Plant Communities of the Spit" authored by three U of T botanists.

This past year and a half has, for Friends, been a time of highs and lows: the highs being the enormous increase in visitors who have come to love and enjoy the Spit's urban wilderness, in part because of the publicity from the *Accidental Wilderness* book and the CBC Nature of Things' programme of the same title, but mostly due to covid. The lows have been the struggle to prevent large commercial filming ventures on The Spit, and the struggle to see that the park is managed and protected well while accepting this vast increase in users. All of this has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

For us, this increased attendance has meant an increased and energized membership, with our numbers now exceeding the previous high of 1200 from the mid-80's.

This is all to say that our members love the Spit **as it is** - a public urban wilderness.

That branding - public urban wilderness - does recognize, as does the Update report, the tensions that exist in making an ecological man-made wilderness accessible to the public, within a highly urbanized region.

The Update acknowledges this when it speaks of creating "a visitor experience plan that strikes the balance between public access and ecological integrity." We see this as being an on-going tension, and we state that the park's ecological integrity should never be sacrificed. Public access has to fit the ecology, not the reverse. The Spit is not like any other park, and its users will resist any attempt to make it like other City parks. Those other parks have their place and function: they are different, and their functions should not be at The Spit/TTP.

Turning to the report's recommendations, the first item, that of the creation of a TTP Joint Management Committee, is welcome news. A single managing entity will be more responsive and aware of the issues arising. And, relating to Item 3 as well, we are certain that with lots of

goodwill, the complex ownership relationships and financial issues can be resolved to the public's benefit – to the end users' benefit.

Item 2, the development of a three-year programme, to address the four noted sub-items is also very welcome.

In the past, the Spit/TTP has thrived when agencies and people work with a light hand, and tread forward quietly and carefully. A coordinated and comprehensive approach to operations and maintenance, in light of the visitor experience is crucial: this is one realm where the community and stakeholder consultation, noted in Item c, will and should influence the programme, to ensure that the ecological Nature-first approach is maintained. All decisions must be made through the lens of the Revised Master Plan.

Developing coordinated policy and enforcement approaches (Item D) is essential and again, long-overdue. The inappropriate behaviour of a few can ruin the park rapidly if left unchecked. The Park must continue with its "No Dogs" policy; the Master Plan prohibition on private automobile access when the park is open must be upheld. Again, in all this, the community and stakeholders' advice will be important, and meaningful.

Item 2c notes the undertaking of a community and stakeholder consultation process. This must be robust and meaningful, and must be much more than just information sessions. The users have a great deal of knowledge of park uses and operations, and this, surely, can only assist the decisions of the Joint Management Committee.

In the past, the advisory committee, and then the user group, did provide valuable input. A similar committee should be established, with diverse representation of users, with one caveat: *That all members subscribe to the urban wilderness principles of the Revised Master Plan and EA as a basic requirement of committee membership.*

Finally, for item 4, it is past time when the park should be shown the budgetary love it deserves. For decades, the park ran on a budgetary form of "Benign Neglect". Now, however, with the wonderful number of users, a budget must be established commensurate to the maintenance operations and enforcement need. We strongly suggest that this budget include the provision of a shuttle bus or van. Council had approved this but, to date, has not funded it. As well as providing a means for those with mobility issues to venture further out onto the Spit, the shuttle will enable the yacht club members to dispense with their automobile access requests. (The Master Plan does allow for a park shuttle.)

In closing, The Spit/TTP is Toronto's internationally-famous park ... it is known all over the world as the best example of a public urban wilderness on the doorstep of a metropolis, and, better still, it is now becoming very well-known to its own residents!

We at Friends of the Spit wish to, and expect to, continue to play a key role in the ongoing maturation of the Spit/Tommy Thompson Park. We look forward to working with staff as they develop specific action plans. **We are here to help.**

Finally, committee members, as this update's primary purpose was to indeed update you, we invite you to come on a socially-distanced walk on The Spit with us as your guides. Walk with us, see The Spit/Tommy Thompson Park through our eyes, and let us help you discover the joys and beauties of Toronto's best place.

Yours sincerely,

FRIENDS OF THE SPIT  
per:

JOHN CARLEY, Co-Chair

GARTH RILEY, Co-Chair

Celebrating 44 years: since 1977, Friends has been advocating for the entire Leslie Street Spit and Baselands to be a car-free Public Urban Wilderness.

Without Friends of the Spit advocacy, The Spit and Baselands would not exist as they do today: a wonderful urban wilderness, enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of visitors yearly.

cc Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, att'n Mr. J. MacKenzie