

## **The Island Airport is for Sale! Time for a public consultation process on what happens next.**

By Ed Hore, March 30, 2021

We learned today the island airport is for sale.

This should lead to a large scale, city-wide discussion of the airport's future. There must be detailed study of the airport's viability in the long term, and also of possible alternative uses of the 215 acre site.

The Tripartite Agreement, the lease agreement governing the island airport between Transport Canada, the Feds and the City, expires in 2033, a mere 12 years away. Any investor intending to continue operating the airport will demand a longer time frame.

No financial investor will be interested in buying the site to run as an airport unless it's clear the airport will be there for many years to come, and will be used long-term by one or more commercially viable airlines. Should there be a lease renewal? That issue is now squarely before us. We have to discuss it as a City.

There's a lot we don't know, but need to know before any sensible decision can be made. Ports Toronto says in today's press release that, in effect, the airport isn't financially viable; it has too much debt. "Liquidity" needs to be "restored."

Porter Airlines, the airport's main user, is a private company. Its books aren't public. It's been without revenue for a year due to Covid, and was rumoured to be in financial difficulty long before that. Will it get a federal bail-out? Even if it does, is it financially viable? No one knows.

The City owns about 20% of the land the airport sits on. It has an important say in what happens. Are voters interested in subsidizing the island airport? Pearson is now easily reachable from downtown on the UP Express. To what extent do voters want to subsidize privileged downtown airline users who find the island airport more convenient than taking a 25 minute train ride to Pearson?

Should the airport site become a 215 acre park? Everyone knows the downtown area of Toronto needs parks. Developing the island airport lands as a park, now connected to the mainland by a tunnel, would likely be a lot cheaper than building proposed Rail Deck Park, whose cost is estimated by the City at \$1.7 Billion (the Canadian Taxpayers Federation says the cost will be \$3.8 Billion).

The public must be involved in consultations about the future of the island airport. There must be a detailed study of the viability of the airport, and also of possible alternative uses of the airport lands from an economic, cultural, transportation efficiency and socio-economic point of view.

Ports Toronto, the seller, should not run that consultation process. It is a creature of statute with a limited mandate under the *Canada Marine Act* to be financially "self-sufficient". Its primary objective must be to get revenue in the door in order to maintain its own existence through operating a commercial harbour and airport, even if those are non-viable, obsolete uses of valuable harbour land. It has no

authority or mandate to consider the public interest or to contemplate recreational, cultural or city planning objectives, or any use of the 215 acre island airport site other than as transportation infrastructure. In short, it's self-interested and not objective.

The Waterfront and Toronto Harbour are today primarily recreational and cultural assets, at the centre of a multi-decade revitalization process. Density on the waterfront has increased enormously and will continue to do so.

Studies may show that the island airport is a relic of long-gone days when the harbour was devoted to transportation infrastructure such as railways, ships, warehouses and airplanes. Or they may show the airport is indeed the best possible use of that valuable real estate. We won't know until these questions have been extensively studied. It's time to get started.