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During COVID-19, there's been a surge in people paddling Toronto's waterfront. The city wants to make access easier



By [Celina Gallardo](#) Staff Reporter
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Photo: ED HORE

Last fall, Gillian Lee was stuck at home working remotely when she looked out the window of her Queens Quay apartment and saw people happily paddling across the lake.

That inspired her to buy a folding kayak and take paddling lessons, kickstarting her new favourite socially distanced hobby.

“I used to see all my friends at work and now I don’t have that anymore,” Lee said. “Having that group of friends out on the water has been an amazing thing for me.”

Lee and her lake friends aren’t the only Torontonians who chose to paddle through the pandemic. Morten Fogh, owner of Fogh Marine and son of late Olympic sailor Hans, said he sold his entire inventory of kayaks last spring, and though he ordered more this year than he ever has, he’s already sold out of the more popular models.

“It’s kind of a bittersweet feeling — I finally have a bunch of people wanting to buy my products, but I can’t supply,” Fogh said. “But it’s great to see because it’s a healthy activity and more people are now aware of nature a little bit more.”

Lee and Fogh are part of a lake-loving movement crowding Toronto’s waterfront — whether it’s the sandy beaches in the east and west, or the deep waters off Queens Quay — that is expected to grow in number this summer as pandemic restrictions force people to find other forms of exercise and recreation.

“During COVID-19, people discovered the waterfront parks, they discovered the beaches, they discovered paddling, kayaking — they just can’t get enough,” said Toronto-Danforth Coun. Paula Fletcher.

According to [city data](#), the use of non-motorized watercraft on Lake Ontario looks likely to grow: 87,230 canoes, kayaks and rowboats were used in the summer of 2020 (compared to 100,518 sailboats and powerboats). The report estimates non-motorized watercraft numbers will grow to 100,000 by 2025.

Like Toronto’s cyclists, these paddlers are challenging the city to quickly deliver solutions to accommodate their hobby — in this case launch points and storage of personal craft along the water’s edge.

Though kayaks and canoes take up less space than sailboats, there still aren’t enough places to keep them.

Fletcher has asked the city's infrastructure committee for recommendations to assist paddlers with easier access to the waterfront, including potential storage.

“People have made their investments and they’re going to stay with their new, loving relationship with the water,” said Fletcher.

For some, the most cost-effective solution may be to own their own craft. But in a city where space is extremely limited, many won’t have a place to store a kayak or don’t have a car to bring it back and forth.

To Fletcher, these are the needs the city has to consider while it revitalizes the waterfront.

“It’s very hard to take your canoe, get it on your car, drive it to the beach, take it off your car, carry it to the water, paddle around for a bit and then schlep it home the same way,” Fletcher said. “They would like to be able to do what most sailors do, which is arrive at the waterfront, maybe bike down and then go out and paddle around.”

The parks, forestry and recreation division will meet with councillors of wards along the waterfront to determine the best locations for storage units and report back to the infrastructure committee on May 25.

While Fletcher waits for these recommendations, she and the city have agreed to contact sailing clubs who have lease agreements with either the city or the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority to see if any are willing to offer storage to non-members.

Currently, the city runs Silverbirch Boathouse near Balmy Beach, providing year-round storage for kayaks and canoes for \$150 per year. There are 400 people on the waiting list hoping to get one of the boathouse’s 150 slots.

But others have seen — and already responded — to the paddling surge.

The Boulevard Club's four-year-old program to accommodate rowers and paddlers exploded from 700 unique users in 2016 to 2,884 unique users in 2020, said Charles Rishor, the club's yachting director.

"We have seen an uptick over the winter of people acquiring small personal watercraft," said Rishor of the west-end club where indoor storage was offered to members.

"All of our indoor storage here at the club is full."

Rishor said the city hasn't contacted The Boulevard Club yet, but he's open to working something out, especially considering how interconnected the club is to public parks.

"To expand a little storage facility there would be a really cool idea," said Rishor.

Yanick Landry, senior vice-commodore at Ashbridge's Bay Yacht Club on Woodbine Beach, said demand for non-motorized watercraft started getting noticeable in 2018 when members wanted to bring their own craft.

His club now offers a membership for people only interested in non-motorized watercraft at \$455 for one person per year: \$280 for membership fees, \$175 for storing one vessel.

"We are now in the process of building four more storage racks before the season launches" because of the enquiries the club has received, said Landry.

Ed Hore, chair of Waterfront for All, a group that advocates for making the lakeshore accessible to all Torontonians, sees non-motorized watercraft almost like the bicycles of the nautical world.

Like bikes, kayaks and paddleboards are accessible to a wider range of people: they cost less than sailboats and motorized watercraft, don't require a licence and learning to operate them is a cinch.

Hore said while he was growing up, bicycles weren't really looked at the same level as other modes of transportation.

“Now people have realized bicycles are a good thing and they should be encouraged — they get people to exercise and they reduce the number of cars,” said Hore. “It’s kind of same with kayaks: they take up less space than sailboats, they’re lower cost, they’re a good way for people to enjoy some fresh air.”

Michelle Gorkunberg hopes to see more storage and launch points for paddlers so others can learn to love the lake as much as she does.

Gorkunberg started kayaking on the waterfront when she was 14. Now 24, she’s a passionate paddler who’s been an instructor at paddling camps and has hosted canoe tours on the lake. It’s what helps her feel connected to the ever-shifting city.

“I’ve seen the skyline change over my tenure,” Gorkunberg said. “Looking at old photos of the skyline, aside from the CN Tower, it looks unrecognizable. It’s really cool to watch that transition.”

Sharon Purdy, a member of The Boulevard Club and avid swimmer and paddleboarder, speaks of Lake Ontario like it’s a precious stone.

“We have a jewel — this priceless resource is ours,” Purdy said. She’s ecstatic that more people are using non-motorized craft to explore the waterfront.

She’s noticed more people on the water, especially since COVID-19 hit, but it doesn’t feel crowded.

“Although I love my solitude on the water, I really want people to experience the water and to appreciate what we have,” Purdy said.



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