

## Friends of the Spit

P.O. Box 51518  
2140A Queen Street East  
Toronto ON M4E 3V7

info@friendsofthespit.ca  
www.friendsofthespit.ca



22 June 2021

BY E-MAIL

Item 7.10 Tommy Thompson Park Update

Board of Directors Meeting, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

Meeting of June 25, 2021

Comments from Friends of the Spit, June 22, 2021

Chair J. Innis, and Board members,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Item 7.10, Tommy Thompson Park Update.

Since 1977, our organization has been providing informed user-driven advocacy and commentary to all organizations with a stake in The Spit, which includes Tommy Thompson Park.

We commend the authors for a clear, concise, and thoughtful report. Overall, like the City's Tommy Thompson Park Update from a month earlier, it is a very positive report.

We thank the TRCA 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 our 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; fourth, to see that continuing operations don't alter or whittle away the urban wilderness of the park; and fifth, to fend off any and all non-compatible uses that are proposed from time to time.

Item 7.10 Tommy Thompson Park Update  
Board of Directors Meeting, June 25, 2021  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority  
22 June 2021

Page 2

Specifically, the success of The Spit is due to a strong Nature-first ecological plan enshrined in the TRCA's Revised Master Plan and EA which was forged through extensive and sometimes exhausting public consultation, coupled with specific policy initiatives – most notably no motorized vehicles/ no pets - and a clear understanding of appropriate uses, which has lead 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 impact of our organization on the creation of The Spit in its current form are: 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 who were Friends' members.

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. This is in part because of the publicity from the book *Accidental Wilderness* 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 well-protected while accepting this vast increase in users. All of this has been magnified by the pandemic.

[ As an aside, we are pleased that the TRCA is now developing a filming policy jurisdiction-wide. We caution, though, that the policy cannot be one-size fits all. The entire Spit is an ESA, and, we believe, should not have commercial filming.]

For us, this increased attendance, and the afore-mentioned issues, 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 -urban wilderness - used by the TRCA in all media to describe The Spit, 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.

Item 7.10 Tommy Thompson Park Update  
Board of Directors Meeting, June 25, 2021  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority  
22 June 2021

Page 3

The City's 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 challenge, 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 City park, and its users will resist any attempt to make it like other parks. Those other parks have their place and function: they are different, and their functions should not be replicated at The Spit/TTP.

Turning to the Update's Recommendations, the first item, that of directing TRCA staff to participate in the TTP Joint Management Committee, is welcome news. A single managing entity will be more responsive and aware of the current and historic issues. With regard to the ultimate transfer of MNRF lands into Tommy Thompson Park, 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.

The development of a three-year programme, to address the park issues noted in both the TRCA's and the City's Updates 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 must 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 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 Pets" policy; and the Master Plan prohibition on private motorized vehicle access when the park is open must be upheld. Again, in all this, the community and stakeholders' advice will be important, and meaningful.

The proposed public and stakeholder consultation model employed will be crucial for The Spit's ongoing success. This model, and processes, 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 provided 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, 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. That budget as outlined must provide all the basics of maintenance and

Item 7.10 Tommy Thompson Park Update  
Board of Directors Meeting, June 25, 2021  
Toronto and Region Conservation Authority  
22 June 2021

Page 4

operations. For far too long, the park has been underfunded. Once the basic needs are met, we strongly suggest that the provision of a shuttle bus (or van) be budgeted. City Council had approved this shuttle bus but, to date, has not funded it. A funding model must be sought for this service. As well as providing a means for those with mobility challenges 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 our ongoing work with TRCA staff as they develop specific action plans. **We are here to help.**

Finally, Board 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.