

TORONTO FORESHORE LAND-GRAB

Lake Macquarie City Council should be a reliable steward and guardian of Lake Macquarie and its precious foreshore. The lake is under pressure from increasing population and urban run-off. Without a secure foreshore buffer, the quality of the lake and its fish stocks will inevitably decline.

Under previous mayors and general managers, Council has worked with state government and the community to restore the quality of the lake and foreshore and improve public access to it.

But this Council under Mayor Kay Fraser has instead determined to become a property developer. A prime Council-owned site on the Toronto foreshore between the Royal Motor Yacht Club and Victory Parade has been earmarked for a 4-6 storey mixed use building.

The decision was rushed through a Council meeting April without prior public consultation. On 4 September a public meeting of around 450 people opposed the decision and this has reinforced by a petition of almost 5300 signatures.

Yet Council has been adamant. It has put forward several arguments. First, Council wants to 'activate' the precinct and Toronto town centre by providing 'product', include tourist accommodation and 'facilities'. Second, and more defensively, it argues that the site is not really part of the foreshore and, rather inconsistently, that the building will take only 10% of the strip of public foreshore at Toronto.

Is there an economic case for 'activation' by construction? Undoubtedly the building will provide lovely views for the lucky occupants, be they permanent residents or visitors. And no doubt the project will be profitable for Council. It acquired the land at 1985 prices. As yet unbuilt apartments in a private venture at the other end of the foreshore have reportedly sold for over two million dollars.

However, the vital question is whether, on balance, the project will be in the *public* interest. A proper economic analysis would include environmental and community benefits that will be forfeited if the proposed development goes ahead.

There is also the aspect of opportunity cost. Would other options make better use of this highly strategic site that is presently just an informal parking place? At its April meeting Council dismissed other options out of hand without any proper evaluation or public process.

Is more accommodation needed? Community members point to the number of new apartments being built and the proliferation of Airbnb. If more units are needed, there plenty of other sites that private firms could develop without alienating public foreshore. But firms would need to acquire the land at market price. Council is looking to make 'quick bucks' by treating its foreshore land as a landbank for development and reaping the betterment value.

Are there better uses for the site? The possibilities are limited only by imagination. In the case of Newcastle's foreshore, a competition was held. For Toronto, a Foreshore Master Plan is being prepared in parallel with a DA for the high-rise project. Yet, despite community pleas, Council has obstinately refused to include its foreshore site in the Master Plan process. No other option is on the table and no other options are being explored. Planning?

It is ridiculous that this strategic site at the junction of the foreshore and the old rail corridor/ greenway/ cycleway from Fassifern and between the yacht club/ marina, the heritage Toronto station and hotel and the town centre is not included in any planning process.

Nor is there any rigorous evaluation. The impact of a 6-storey building on heritage viewlines and of the hard surface area on run-off and water quality in the lake, as also traffic, parking and public access are still being ignored, even though these are all matters for which Council has public responsibility.

The result looks to be a classic case of public loss, private gain. The twist is that Council itself has become the developer, grabbing public land and subverting its own planning processes without regard to environmental and community responsibilities.

It's a bad precedent. Lake Macquarie communities should be alarmed. What is happening now in Toronto could happen next anywhere around the lake.

Howard Dick

Conjoint Professor
Faculty of Business & Law
University of Newcastle