

Expanding Toronto Island Airport Reality Check — Unanswered Questions

May 2026

By David Powell

David Powell lives in Toronto. A retired lawyer and association executive, he has no affiliation with any organization or special interest.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SNAPSHOT: Today's Toronto Inner Harbour (without airport expansion)

- Attracts 18 million Torontonians and visitors each year
- The 4th most visited neighbourhood in Toronto (after Downtown, Yonge & Dundas and the Financial District)
- Supports more than 100,000 jobs – a higher share of visitor economy workers are located in the Inner Harbour than in the rest of the City of Toronto
- Contributes \$13 billion to GDP and is on the verge of an unprecedented wave of growth
- Currently, over 85,000 residents
- Projected to deliver 75,000 new homes, 130,000 new residents and 50,000 jobs by 2040.

Source: *Ripple Effect: Unlocking Toronto's Waterfront Potential*, The Toronto Region Board of Trade, May 2024, at pages 19-20

What is this debate about? It is not about whether Toronto should have an airport on the island. It already does, and many residents value it as a convenient way to fly to short-haul destinations. The issue is whether the city should permanently transform one of its greatest public assets without a transparent, evidence-based plan that honestly weighs the cost-benefits, trade-offs and alternatives.

A “crown jewel”: **Toronto-on-the Lake's Inner Harbour.** Toronto's Inner Harbour has become one of North America's most successful examples of waterfront revitalization. Over the past several decades, governments and private investors have committed billions of dollars to transform a formerly industrial shoreline into a dense mixed-use urban environment that supports housing, tourism, recreation, entertainment, transportation and public life. At the centre of this debate now sits a major proposal: expanding the Island Airport to serve commercial jets and increase passenger traffic by 600% from a current 1.75 million annually to as many as 10 million, making it Canada's 5th largest airport.

Torontonians deserve a transparent, comprehensive and evidence-based public review. This brief argues that before any irreversible decisions are made, Torontonians deserve a transparent, comprehensive and evidence-based public debate over what airport expansion would actually mean for the city, the waterfront and the Inner Harbour as a whole. The central concern is not opposition to aviation itself, nor a call to close the airport. Rather, the concern is whether a dramatic escalation in airport scale would fundamentally alter the balance that currently exists among aviation, waterfront revitalization, recreation, tourism, housing and public access to the lake.

How big will an expanded airport be? At present, there are no complete public disclosures concerning infrastructure requirements, financing structures, transportation impacts, environmental consequences, land requirements, implementation timelines or broader economic trade-offs. Yet the scale of the proposed expansion appears substantial. The Toronto Port Authority has reportedly discussed runway extensions westward into Lake Ontario, extending the runway system to approximately 1,830 metres, with additional extensive approach lighting infrastructure for a total length of 3.24 kilometres (roughly the distance along University Avenue downtown from Bloor Street to Front Street.).

Transportation, Congestion and Parking. The proposal raises major transportation and congestion concerns. The Toronto Region Board of Trade says traffic congestion along the waterfront is already some of the worst in the city. Unlike most modern urban airports, the Island Airport lacks integrated rapid transit access. How will downtown roads, already strained by

commuter traffic, sporting events and waterfront activity, absorb thousands of additional daily passenger vehicle trips? Parking infrastructure alone could require large multi-storey facilities on an already densely developed waterfront.

Traveller Convenience. The brief also questions assumptions that the Island Airport is necessarily more convenient than Pearson International Airport in a high-volume expansion scenario. Pearson benefits from major transit investments, including the UP Express rail link and direct highway access. By contrast, access to the Island Airport remains constrained by downtown congestion and limited public transit integration. The brief argues that a substantially enlarged airport may undermine the very convenience its proponents often cite as its primary advantage.

Air Pollution. Environmental concerns are another central issue. Existing studies referenced in the brief indicate that airport-related activity already contributes significantly to local air pollution in nearby neighbourhoods. Research conducted in the Bathurst Quay area found elevated ultrafine particle concentrations associated with airport operations. Expansion could increase both aircraft emissions and ground transportation emissions, undermining Toronto's TransformTO net-zero emissions strategy.

Water Quality. Water circulation and quality within the Inner Harbour also emerge as significant concerns. Prior environmental assessments examining earlier runway extension proposals concluded that expanded landmass into the harbour could substantially reduce water circulation and flushing capacity, increasing the residence time of polluted water from storm sewers and combined sewer overflows. Critics argue that larger runway expansions now being discussed may intensify these impacts.

Noise Impacts. It is claimed that modern jets are no noisier than the current DASH 8 aircraft using the airport. That may well be true. But, today, aircraft leave or arrive every 20-25 minutes or so. With the jet expansion, arrivals and departures would probably be scheduled every 2-3 minutes, creating an almost continuous noise pattern throughout the day. Ports Toronto has advised the city that residential buildings constructed on or near the lake should be designed to keep windows closed (will balconies or patios be feasible?) and that the wording of rental/sales contracts should shield the airport from liability related to noise impacts.

Ferries and Boating. The expansion proposal also raises questions about the future of boating, ferry operations and public lake access. **The Inner and Outer Harbours, and immediately adjacent waterfront support 20 clubs**, sailing races, kayaking, ferry traffic and tourist vessels. Previous environmental studies suggested that expanded runway safety zones and jet blast effects could significantly affect navigation and manoeuvrability in surrounding waterways. A permanent fixed vehicular link to the island airport has also been discussed as a possible long-term requirement, potentially affecting harbour circulation and marine access.

Waterfront Development and Housing. Perhaps the largest long-term issue involves Toronto's broader waterfront redevelopment strategy. The eastern waterfront and Port Lands are currently undergoing one of Canada's largest urban redevelopment initiatives, with tens of thousands of future residents, major affordable housing targets and substantial mixed-use investment planned. Some prior environmental assessments suggested that airport expansion could create conflicts with federal airport zoning regulations, potentially limiting building heights and densities in planned neighbourhoods. Airport expansion is not merely an aviation issue, but a major city-building and housing policy issue.

Regional Airport Strategy. The brief questions whether major airport expansion is necessary at all within the broader Southern Ontario airport system. In January 2025, four federal ministers confirmed that the Government of Canada will not build an airport on the Pickering lands, officially ending over 50 years of uncertainty, returning 75 km² (18,600 acres) to parkland, agricultural and other community uses. The government concluded that the regional airport network — including Pearson, Hamilton, Waterloo and the Island Airport — possesses sufficient long-term capacity to meet projected demand. There is no apparent urgent aviation capacity crisis requiring large-scale expansion at the Island Airport. Meanwhile, Pearson Airport is already undertaking a multi-billion-

dollar expansion project expected to increase capacity over the coming decade dramatically beyond what the island airport seeks.

The Business Case. Underlying many of these concerns is skepticism surrounding the business case for expansion. The brief notes that the Island Airport is far from returning to pre-pandemic passenger levels. So far, proponents have only provided aspirational, unsubstantiated financial goals. There are no publicly released detailed projections, evidence-based financial assumptions or comprehensive cost-benefit analyses. Questions remain regarding who would ultimately bear infrastructure costs, what public expenditures would be required and how broader Inner Harbour economic activity would be impacted.

Personal Observations

Toronto's Inner Harbour is one of the city's greatest civic achievements. Over the last half century, enormous public effort and investment have transformed what was once a heavily industrialized waterfront into one of North America's most successful urban lakefronts. The city embraced an ambitious vision: an Inner Harbour centred increasingly around people, public life and urban experience. Today, the Inner Harbour functions simultaneously as:

- public realm,
- a neighbourhood,
- a tourism destination,
- an employment district,
- a cultural corridor,
- a recreational haven,
- a transportation corridor,
- and
- an environmental asset

That layered balanced complexity is precisely what makes it valuable.

The concern is whether a dramatic escalation in airport scale fundamentally overwhelms that balance. That issue cannot be understood narrowly through the lens of aviation infrastructure alone. It must also be examined through the lenses of:

- city-building,
- waterfront planning,
- transportation,
- housing,
- environmental sustainability,
- economic development, and
- quality of urban life.

Cities increasingly compete on quality of place. Large infrastructure decisions shape cities for generations. Once major physical transformations occur on the waterfront, they are extremely difficult—if not impossible—to reverse. These are not peripheral questions. They are fundamental. Toronto's waterfront is too important to be reshaped through incremental assumptions, incomplete information or narrowly-framed analysis.

Proposals to expand this airport for jets have resurfaced repeatedly over the years. Each time, they have been studied and rejected. Why should this time be different? The scale of the current proposal appears far larger than past versions. At what point does airport expansion begin to dominate, wiping out surrounding uses rather than coexist with them? That threshold matters. The burden of proof on proponents must be very high.

Toronto's waterfront belongs not only to today's residents but to future generations. The decisions made now will shape the city's relationship to the lake for decades to come. That is why this debate matters.

Before an irreversible decision is made to expand the Island Airport to serve jets and permanently degrade the Inner Harbour, there are many questions that need to be answered if Torontonians are to properly assess the choices before them. For public confidence in the ultimate decisions, no action should be taken, no changes made, until an evidence-based plan is reviewed in open, fully-informed and transparent public hearings, including the consequences for the Inner Harbour and its users, the size of expected infrastructure, land requirements, costing and timelines.