

# Hume: Downsview Park takes shape

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Artist rendering of the potential field house for Toronto FC at Downsview Park.

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To a pessimist, Downsview Park is still a half empty site. To an optimist, it's half full — finally. But as a brief tour earlier this week confirmed, after years of apparent inactivity, Downsview has started to show signs of life. Though there's a long way to go — probably two or three decades — the shape of things has started to emerge from this vast wasteland.

For example, a new “lake” can now be seen on the west side of the massive, 672-acre property. Visible from Keele St., it is surrounded by a series of hillocks that have transformed this sprawling post-industrial landscape into a stretch of rolling countryside.

In one section, there will be a 40-acre wood, to another, an aerospace cluster. In addition to that, five neighbourhoods of 15,000 to 18,000 inhabitants are planned and, of course, the subway extension that will run from Downsview to York University is underway. That means the park will have its own subway station.

In case you had forgotten, Canada's first “National Urban Park” came into being at Downsview, a former military base, in 1999. That was when the federal government launched an international design competition duly won by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and our own design polymath Bruce Mau.

Their submission, Tree City, was, to say the least, vague. That was appropriate perhaps, as no one really knows what a National Urban Park is.

After that initial flurry of activity, Downsview Park disappeared behind a series of worthy but quite ordinary programs. Films are shot there, soccer games played, trees planted and flea markets operated. There's also an aviation museum kept barely alive by a group of saintly volunteers.

In 2003, however, Downsview hired landscape architect David Anselmi to put together a real plan for redeveloping the site. More recently, former City of Toronto councillor and budget chief David Soknacki joined the board as chair and then Bill Bryck was named CEO. Together these three have managed to overcome years of inertia, neighbourhood opposition and political indifference.

In the meantime, earth has been moved, memoranda of understanding signed and deals negotiated. Even the giant boring machine that will tunnel the subway up to York has been delivered and now awaits its task.

Change has started. Though these are early days, the one thing already obvious is the enormous potential of the site. A generation from now, the park will have been transformed, as will the surrounding neighbourhoods.

"Keele Street will be the new Queen Street," Soknacki declares. "This is an area that will bloom."

Soknacki's words may seem a little over the top. It remains to be seen what becomes of this part of Keele. But there's no question Downsview dramatically alters things on this length of the street.

Prominent landscape architect, Janet Rosenberg, member of the Downsview design team, also has high hopes for the future of Keele. But, she says bluntly, "It is a horrible street." Most would agree. Keele is a nasty suburban thoroughfare — along with Sheppard, Jane, Finch and the like — planned for cars, not people. But with a park on its eastern side, complete with boardwalk, vantage points, gardens and paths, Keele will become a destination, not just a way from A to B.

Soknacki imagines a street lined with stores and cafes, which in turn will also help generate the critical mass of people and activity needed to breathe life into revitalization. That won't happen next week, but the long-term prospects are exciting. Considering the huge amount of underused land in these parts, Downsview will inevitably trigger a new wave of development, denser and more urban than seen here.

So far, Jonathon Powers' National Squash Academy has moved in. Toronto Football Club will construct a state-of-the-art training facility. The intention is to create what Bryck calls "a nationally recognized centre for sporting excellence."

At the north end of the site, where there's a runway that forms part of Bombardier's massive Downsview plant, buildings can't be more than nine storeys tall.

But it's also the location of the new subway station — go figure — which means no residential density. Instead, the plan calls for an aerospace hub. The University of Toronto and Centennial College are partners, and industry businesses large and small are expected.

“There will be forward thinkers, production guys and small innovators all within reach of a subway station,” says Joe Lobko, a Toronto architect whose credits include the acclaimed Wychwood Barns and Evergreen at the Brickworks. “There will also be an aerospace museum.”

Lobko also talks about a design review panel that will be assembled to ensure architectural quality.

The issue is money. Ottawa handed over ownership of the site several years ago, but other than that, Downsview is on its own. The idea is to pay for infrastructure and amenities with money raised from rent and development. It’s a model that can work; the hard part is getting started, especially in a country where no one wants to go first.

But the pressure to accommodate the growing number of people who want to live in the city will continue to grow. At a time when gas costs have topped \$1.40 a litre, the need to intensify must be obvious even to the most hardened suburbanite. But maybe not; after all, we’re still chewing up some of the most fertile land in Canada and spitting it out as sprawl.

The fact is that downtown Toronto can take care of itself, but it’s areas such as Downsview where the big changes will unfold. That’s where the battle of the future will be lost or won. “This is city building,” Soknacki says. “We’re here to move forward. I personally have clocked over 50 public meetings. It’s going to happen.”

But in Downsview, as in most parts of Toronto, patience is a virtue; the park isn’t due to open until the summer of 2012.