

Doug Ford sets sights on Ontario Place redevelopment

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Premier Doug Ford, whose grandiose schemes for Toronto's waterfront were thwarted when he was a city councillor and his brother was mayor, is setting his sights on redeveloping Ontario Place.

Sources told the Star that Ford wants to scuttle proposals that were being considered by the previous Liberal government and start anew with an international competition to rethink the sprawling green space along Lake Shore Blvd. W.



In July 2017, then-premier Kathleen Wynne unveiled a new \$30-million, 7.5-acre waterfront park on the site of what had been an Ontario Place parking lot. (RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO)

The premier, whose Progressive Conservatives toppled Kathleen Wynne's Liberals in the June 7 election, signalled three weeks ago that changes were afoot.

"Ontario Place was spectacular in the day," Ford said at the Aug. 17 opening of the Canadian National Exhibition, which is adjacent to the provincially owned park.

"I'm proud to announce we're going to work in conjunction with the CNE, redo Ontario Place and make it the most spectacular destination anywhere in North America to visit," he said.

"We'll bring it back to life."

Officials in his government were tight-lipped about what's planned.

"We will have more to say on Ontario Place in the future. Stay tuned," said Richard Clark, a spokesman for Tourism, Culture, and Sport Minister Sylvia Jones.

The Globe and Mail reported in July that plans for the redevelopment of the park were on hold during the transition from Wynne's Liberals to Ford's Tories.

In July 2017, Wynne [unveiled](#) a new \$30-million, 7.5-acre waterfront park on the site of what had been an Ontario Place parking lot.

The Trillium Park, with its 1.3 km William G. Davis Trail, which was named for the premier who launched Ontario Place in 1971, was the beginning of a broader revitalization.

Former premier Dalton McGuinty had shuttered much of Ontario Place in 2012 during an austerity push, saving \$20 million by slashing 48 full-time jobs and 600 summer positions.

McGuinty then conscripted [John Tory](#), now the mayor of Toronto, to write a report on the future of the 51-hectare park.

Tory's [study](#), which was well-received at Queen's Park, touted "a new public backyard."

Among the 18 recommendations in his 55-page report were that up to 15 per cent of the site would be developed with condos on the west island, a hotel or resort — but no casino — and corporate headquarters or an educational research institute.

The rest would be devoted to parks, cafes, artist studios, and other draws, including a new concert venue and restoring the iconic Cinesphere geodesic dome.

Wynne's government later issued a request for proposals on that redevelopment, but emphasized that no condos or a casino could be part of any pitch.

"Our government was driven by a few principles, including easy accessibility to an interesting site for as many people as possible," a former Liberal official confided, expressing hope that Ford builds upon the previous plan.

The source said the idea was to integrate Ontario Place with Exhibition Place and "do it all with minimal public investment by attracting private-sector investors from around the world who would partner with Toronto and Ontario players to ensure homegrown elements in the project."

Conservative insiders say Ford is taking a personal interest in Ontario Place.

During his one term as a Toronto councillor — when his late brother, Rob Ford, was mayor — he envisioned a vast redevelopment for the waterfront, including the world's biggest Ferris wheel modelled on the London Eye in Britain and a 1.6 million square foot "megamall."

"What we'd like to do is have a monorail system that's running right from the Pan Am Games (site) right along the lakefront and stops at Union Station and Ontario Place and right across the front of the lake," Ford [said](#) in an August 2011 interview with CBC Radio's Metro Morning.

He hoped to take control of the Port Lands from Waterfront Toronto, the city-provincial-federal agency charged with redeveloping the east downtown shoreline.

Ford wanted to overturn Waterfront Toronto's plan for the gradual introduction of condos, offices, parks, and retail to the former industrial lands primarily owned by the city.

The Star later [revealed](#) that Ford had crafted his vision after discussions with Australian mall developer Westfield Group, whom he said he expected to be among many international bidders in a contest to decide which company would lead the Port Lands renewal.

But his dream was [dashed](#) by public opposition. Ford allies at city hall withdrew support and council eventually passed a compromise that saw Waterfront Toronto accelerate its existing plans.

Still, in 2013, Ford championed a downtown casino near Lake Ontario, saying it would bring jobs and vitality to the core without the crime some were predicting.

"I don't see why we can't get a casino downtown," he told the Toronto Sun before city councillors — who got an earful from the public — rejected the casino push. "How can people say no to this?"

The head of Ontario Lottery and Gaming, the provincial Crown corporation that at the time hoped Toronto would accept a waterfront casino, was Rod Phillips. He is now Ford's environment minister.

When Ford ran against Tory in the 2014 mayoral race, he again raised the downtown casino proposal, telling Bloomberg News that as mayor he would try to put a gambling palace on the waterfront.

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