



East-enders fear big boxes on Eastern will mess with the local economy and ecology.

## News

# Reimagining Leslieville

Residents fly their own plan for remake of waterfront lands slated for big-box disaster

Mike Smith

While east-end residents and city staff gear up for a planning battle royal over the proposed box store on Toronto Film Studio lands, developers are trying to rig the fight.

So far, they've won the right to have their case decided under the old official plan, not the new. And now, the Ontario Municipal Board has just ruled that any decisions about the Eastern Avenue film land owned by SmartCentres would also apply to an adjoining property, readying the final piece in the creation of a big-box alley between Carlaw and Leslie.

It's all looking a little bleak for Leslieville residents, but they're gearing up for a major presence at the upcoming OMB hearing.

Nearly 150 people have signed up to participate in what promises to be a gruelling filibuster fest. Most will likely offer individual deputations on how a box store would affect the area.

Councillor Paula Fletcher tells me community members are researching the impact of a so-called shopping "power centre," but some will also try to get planners to take up their own homegrown alternative proposal.

Despite the snowstorm on March 5, 30 or so locals gathered at the Ralph Thornton Centre to sketch out an alt design within the context of city staff's recently completed area plan, with help from Ryerson urban and regional planning students. A shame no planners were present at Ralph Thornton.

As members of the East Toronto Community Coalition dove into their work, drawing on table-sized planning maps of the area, I settled in to watch. The participants' ingenuity was soon apparent, and the planning students' role was merely to offer expertise on statutes and keep things moving.

The favoured approach was to work with the existing film lands site as it is rather than raze it.

The one remaining brick building from the old A.R. Clarke Tannery, destroyed by fire in 2001, would be left standing, becoming a central point in an island of green space lined with river-like bike paths.

On the west side, a portion of the existing industrial buildings would become a ReStore, where waste materials – including those from the site's redevelopment and from the small-scale film work that would ideally continue – could find other uses or be sent to retrofit industries and design shops.

The store could make links with the area's vintage furniture shops by offering reupholstering. "And ideally, whatever businesses are there would have to offer internships to the community," said ETCC's Kelly Carmichael.

In the other corner, residents imagined a sort of hybrid institution (maybe George Brown?) with trade schools that could partner with the ReStore and a land restoration program that could guide the rehabilitation of the southeastern portion into marshland.

Listening to this discussion, I quickly realized this sort of exercise could benefit all communities, even those that don't have an OMB case looming or a councillor like Fletcher willing to broker bureaucratic cooperation. With this sort of proactive planning, would the OMB become less of a threat?

Of course, the proposal will have trouble breathing the rarefied air of the private market: you can't compel people to build what you want. It's telling that even in the heyday of alloy buzz terms like "smart growth" and "public-private partnership," an attempt to create a vision for an urban neighbourhood still feels like an exercise in science fiction.

It's hard not to think back to the 1950s, that golden era of sanguine sci-fi, when city government and private

financiers last showed the temerity to build something big from the ground up according to the progressive principles of the time.

That was Don Mills, centrally planned 50 years ago as a mixed-use (relatively), pedestrian-friendly live-work community. Those words are basic urban planning vernacular today, but they're difficult to put into practice when private developers won't think beyond their property or experiment on open land.

But there is that 7.5 hectares south of Eastern. Speaking to me later at City Hall, Councillor Fletcher tells me she wants the provincial Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal to stop the OMB madness.

"This is crucial land," she says, "and someone should take an interest. It should be the minister."

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