

World-famous architect condemns big-box plan near Toronto waterfront

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The fight to stop a big-box store development from setting up near Toronto's eastern waterfront has been given some high-profile support.

Daniel Libeskind, one of the world's best-known architects, calls a plan to create the

development near Toronto's waterfront "unthinkable."

Libeskind, the architect who designed the Royal Ontario Museum's Crystal as well as many other high-profile projects around the world, says the development would be a mistake.

In a letter from his office in New York, Libeskind writes:

"The lakefront of Toronto is one of the greatest natural and public assets of the city. Exploiting that waterfront with large scale 'black box' facilities and their attendant infrastructure is unthinkable. Twenty-first century Toronto needs to re-appropriate the waterfront and make it a focus and cultural destination for the entire Metropolitan region.

"It is the pedestrian, the biker, the skater, the jogger, families, children and tourists, who deserve the landscape and sophisticated urbanity of this area. These types of large retail volumes belong elsewhere.

"A sustainable city needs an uncompromising attitude to the greatest of its natural resources and to the pleasures and enjoyment it affords to the public at large."

The project, which is slated to be built in Leslieville, along Lake Shore Boulevard, calls for construction of 700,000 square feet of retail space, along with 2,000 parking spots.

David Crombie, a former mayor of the city as well as the author of a report on the development of the waterfront, says the development is contrary to everything the city wants — a place where people can live, work and play.

OMB to rule on project

The City of Toronto has already said no to the project but is being second-guessed by the Ontario Municipal Board, where developments are routinely appealed.

The case will be heard in May, and local resident Kelly Carmichael describes what she says is at stake: "If we lose at the OMB this development will undermine the vibrant Queen Street retail sector. It will create unmanageable traffic gridlock and it will replace our diverse film jobs with part-time, minimum-wage jobs."

Ken Greenberg, another prominent architect, said the eastern waterfront will become a nightmare if big box stores are allowed to set up.

"This entire stretch turns into the proverbial suburban mall strip, with a total denial of everything the city has worked for almost two decades," he said.

Supporters of the development say the dispute has more to do with a bias against retail development rather than an attempt to protect the waterfront. They argue a new big-box development will provide 2,000 jobs, inject millions into the economy through taxes, and give many people what they want: a cheap place to shop.