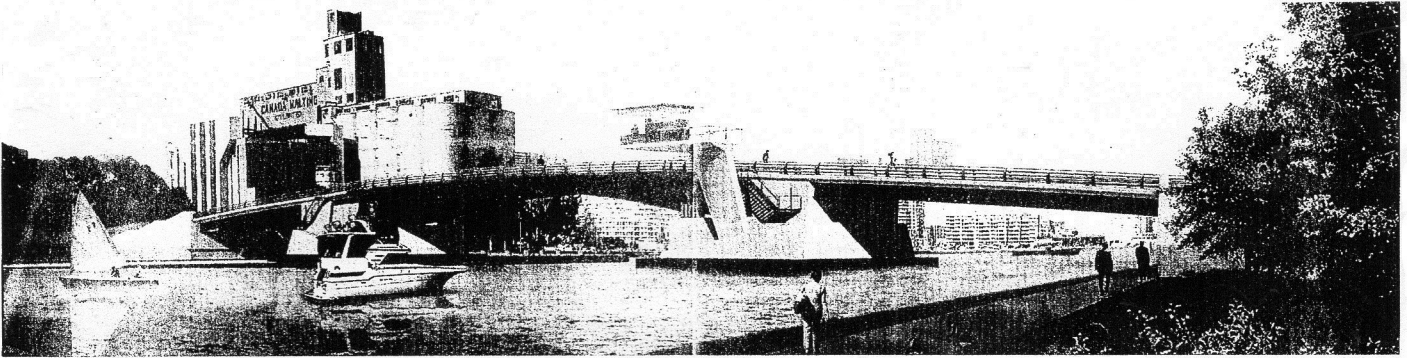


Desire to preserve the islands runs deep



A rendering of the proposed fixed link to the island airport. If David Miller becomes mayor, he'll have to persuade the federal government to "unamend" the agreement that originally banned the project.

John Barber



Mayoral candidate David Miller was the first person to insist the island airport expansion wasn't just a downtown issue, long enough ago that his assertion seemed far more wishful than prescient. In fact, there are still people who believe the islands are still just a downtown issue, despite the emergence of Mr. Miller — the only leading candidate to oppose an airport bridge — as the clear front-runner in the race to replace outgoing Mayor Mel Lastman (who was briefly spotted last week drifting off the coast of his own favourite island, Prince Edward, before disappearing into the fog — perhaps forever).

But some of those same skeptics also complain that this suddenly invigorating election is nothing but a referendum on the island airport. Both things can't be true, although both are true enough to make a puzzle. Until the solution appears Nov. 10, when Mr. Miller's fate will become known, nobody can tell how broad Toronto's desire to preserve its islands really is.

But have no doubt, it runs deep. "In 1935," said Paul Henderson, offering a history lesson at a triumphal press conference Thursday where smart young lawyers unveiled an impressive citizen-led legal attack against the bridge, "they started to build a tunnel to the [island] airport."

This veteran water-rat and uber-Torontonian, a member of the International Olympic Committee, knows this because he sailed by at the time. "But Mayor Sam McBride stopped it by cutting off the funds," he added.

He knows that because Mr. McBride was a friend of his fa-

ther's. The good people of Toronto, according to the sailor, were so pleased that they named a ferry after their island-friendly mayor.

The beautiful Sam McBride is still the pride of the fleet, the foreground in countless postcard images of Toronto and the perfect emblem of the city's always slightly shaky claim to be a green and gracious place.

"Whatever mayor stops this tunnel should have a ferry named after him," Mr. Henderson concluded.

Mayor David Miller will no doubt be able to depend on that traditional compliment. But first he has to get elected. Then he has to fulfill his promise, and no lawsuit will help him in the tricky task of inducing city council to undo a decision it made with such confidence only a year ago.

Truth be told, the lawsuit, filed by a group called Community AIR, is currently just a backup plan. (And a premature one to boot: How can judges review a project that still hasn't received federal

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approval?) The group only did it now to make a show of force — and to convince voters that, despite the incessant “shovel-in-the-ground” disinformation put out by the clownish port authoritarians, the building of the bridge is not a done deal.

“By taking this action today we effectively called the bluff of the Toronto Port Authority,” Community AIR leader Allan Sparrow said. “We can assure Torontonians there will be no start to the construction of this bridge before the municipal election.”

Citizens will decide the issue for themselves, Mr. Sparrow added. “They will not be hindered, intimidated or put off by this federal agency that is, in our view, the biggest single impediment to the revitalization of the waterfront in the downtown core.”

Interestingly, the port authority itself — and the very narrow band of vested interests that comprise the totality of its public support — appears to have given up the legal threats it was making a few weeks

ago, when it promised to sue the city for hundreds of millions of dollars if it revoked permission to build the bridge.

One reason is that it still lacks permission to build the bridge, and nobody can sue anybody for taking away something they don't have. A more likely reason is that one of the well-connected Liberals in the Miller campaign phoned Transport Minister David Collette and asked him to call off the dogs, who had strayed far outside their pens. Mr. Collette had already made clear that the bridge is now a political issue that will be decided in a political contest — a referendum of sorts.

For his part, Mr. Miller is confident that an anti-bridge mandate will clear away the airport's political support on council, allowing him to undo the deal quickly. “You've seen how council works,” he said last week. “The mayor's agenda — when he has a clear one — wins the day.”

Then he'll have to persuade the federal government to “unamend”

the agreement that, before the Lastman party got its hands on it, banned a fixed link between the island and the mainland. Once again, he intends to rely on moral suasion.

“This is a tailor-made opportunity for Paul Martin — for free! — to say, ‘I'm the new leader, I've promised a new deal for cities, the people of Toronto have spoken clearly on this issue, it's an issue that economically makes no sense and it's tainted by backroom deals,’” said Mr. Miller. “In sum, ‘I'm a new broom too.’”

Before any of that happens, however, the people of Toronto will have to decide what they think about the future of their long-treasured islands — all the people, not just those whose lives will be most directly affected by an expanded airport.

If they really care, they can only vote Miller. And if it turns out they don't care that much, and the Miller campaign fails as a result, nothing will stop that bridge from going up yesterday.