

New rental homes bid for islands

Another plan
seeks to build
hotels, restaurants

BY JACK LAKEY
CITY HALL BUREAU

A group of Toronto Islands residents is trying to revive a controversial plan from the early 1990s to build up to 100 new homes on the islands.

The group, which calls itself the Toronto Island Housing Initiative, hopes to persuade the city to fund construction of the new housing under its Let's Build program, which has

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— ISLAND RESIDENT
BOB GIBSON

about \$12 million to be used to create more units of affordable rental housing throughout the city.

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At the same time, another development plan proposed by a separate group, calls for hotels and restaurants in an attempt to make the islands "a big playground again."

Bob Gibson, an island resident, stressed that the plans for the new homes are in a very early stage and that they still don't know whether funding can be found to pay for the project.

"We're going back to what was done in the early 1990s and saying, 'let's revisit it,'" said Gibson. "There's interest in the city in developing affordable rental housing and we think there is a need for it over here, partly because the community is doomed to gentrification and a geriatric population if we don't."

When the plan to expand the size of the island community was initiated in 1992, it called for an 80-unit project of one-storey, single-family dwellings to be operated as a co-operative and called the Flying Toad Co-op. An estimated \$10 million to pay for construction of the co-op was to be underwritten by the province.

Special legislation called for rent on the 80 units to be geared to income and also provided for construction of another 30 houses to be built by the owners. The land beneath the homes was to have been leased to them for 99 years at a total cost of \$36,000 to \$46,000 each.

The project never got off the ground after the NDP government was defeated in 1995 and replaced by the Progressive Conservatives, who cancelled funding for all housing projects previously approved and stopped all funding for new housing initiatives.

But since the city began the Let's Build program, Gibson said the island group has come together to explore the possibility of building affordable rental housing on the island — preferably along the same lines as the co-op units that were part of the original plan.

Gibson said the area being considered for the co-op is between the fire hall and Shaw House on Ward's Island, where the original Flying Toad Co-op was also to be built.

Island residents have long feared that an unfriendly government might try to end all housing on the islands. Many believe that the key to long-term sustainability lies in expanding it.

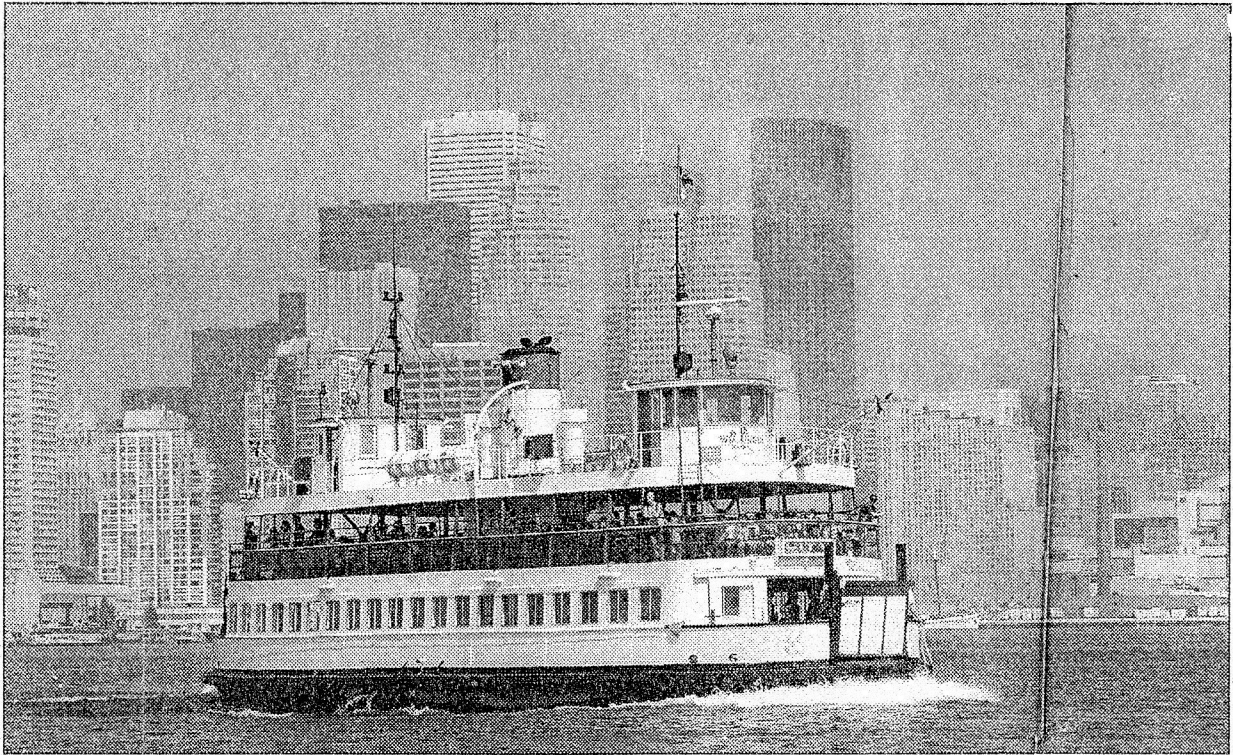
Before 1956, when the old Metro Toronto government took over the 11 islands and converted them to parks, there had been neighbourhoods, stores and hotels. The islands had many more houses than the 250 or so that exist today.

But Tommy Thompson, Metro's first parks commissioner, decided more green space was needed and bulldozed structures on Centre Island and Hanlan's Point, setting the stage for a long, bitter dispute between islanders and the Metro government.

A brochure produced by the new housing group says, "we are willing to lend our support to any project that will result in more affordable housing on the island."

"Our main goal, however, is the revival of the plans (proposed in the early 1990s) for the development of new housing. We are asking the island community to re-affirm the support it gave the project in 1992-94."

Plans stress housing, tourism



BORIS SPREMO, CM/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

ISLAND BOUND: Increasing ferry traffic to the islands is the thrust of two plans. One aims to bring more residents; the other wants more tourists.

A second coalition of harbourfront communities is working on another front, attempting to revitalize the island by turning it into "a big playground again."

Members of Community AIR (Airport Impact Review), a not-for-profit group established last year to monitor the island airport's environmental impact, will present their vision on May 1.

Community AIR spokesperson Allan Sparrow says it will involve a fair amount of tourist and recreation development.

A key feature of the proposal is to bring back the hotels and restaurants to the island, making it possible to develop eco-tourism and bird-watching tours.

About 50 people attended a community meeting Tuesday night at the Algonquin Island clubhouse, where lawyer Sarah Miller, a member of the Flying Toad Co-op, told them that all the blueprints, approvals and plans are in still in place.

Sarah Power, who works for Let's Build, was also at the meeting to explain how the program considers projects for funding and how the group should go about applying. But she did not promise any funding or special consideration for their initiative.

"We don't want to create a park that is empty six months of a year," he says. "It'd be nice if we could restore the beaches, the wetland, lagoons and boardwalks ... and take the best of the old days by matching up with the expectations of the people today."

Councillor Pam McConnell, who represents the area, was also at the meeting but refused to say whether she supports the concept of using scarce Let's Build cash to create housing on the island.

With files from Nicholas Keung