

Toronto's largest brownfield awaits clean up

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On a summer's day the tall grasses sway with the breeze as a red hawk sails overhead looking for mice and rabbits while a pair of turkey vultures bide their time. It's not unusual to see the odd deer and there have been several coyote sightings. All the while, locals and their dogs walk through the many trails cutting through the bush areas and the savannah-like grassy areas. There are also two or three homeless people camping out in the summer with one living there year round.

It's been called the Gerrard Prairie but the giveaway is the dozens of bright blue square, vertical boxes randomly scattered around the property, test locations for extracting samples from the toxic plume lurking below.

Once it was a brickworks and later a gravel quarry; in the 1950s, it became an unregulated dump, situated as it was on the other side of the Toronto boundary in a sleepy Scarborough Township. With few regulations, everything from radioactive paint (luminous paint for instrument panels for the war effort) to barrels of solvents like toluene and xylene are known to lurk there.

Local lore has it that if the gasses brewing below the ground were to ignite, half of Scarborough would go with it. It's hyperbole, but there may be some truth. Over in the corner by the supermarket there's an fenced-in brick shed where a flare stack burns off gases 24/7 and a 22-year-old report by McLaren Engineering recommended any structures subsequently constructed should have an explosive gas alarm installed to warn occupants of a dangerous build up.

It's hardly the kind of feature a developer would want to put on the marketing collateral but nonetheless there are plans in play to develop the sites which is owned by two distinctly different entities with two distinct approaches.

The City of Toronto owns nearly 20 acres under Build Toronto, the agency which has a mandate to monetize redundant titles. The land was acquired as part of the long shelved Scarborough Expressway in 2006.

However, part of the property, about 27 acres was acquired in 1963 by Runnymede Developments which filed a plan to build 1,450 units in four highrise buildings in 1968. Demand for apartments fell and Runnymede sat on its proposal passing title to Gerrard Clonmore Development.

In 1988 the towers went back on the table to great opposition. The neighbourhood had changed from a sleepy backwater to vibrant area of homes and schools. The city had grown, traffic had grown and the site was landlocked with the CN tracks to the north and limited escape for any traffic.

Despite some victories at the Ontario Municipal Board, the highrise towers locked up in a battle between the developer and residents, backed by the Ministry of Environment and the City of Toronto, meaning Build Toronto's scheme will likely be the first to put a shovel into the ground.

Following meticulous consultation with residents, Build Toronto is planning mixed townhomes and retail on its portion with 100,000 square feet of retail fronting Victoria Park Avenue.

First, though, the ground soil will have to be extensively cleaned up and that's going to present a challenge on a scale little seen in urban Toronto. While Build also has a 24-acre brownfield property at 260 Eighth St. in Etobicoke, it's in an industrial zone, whereas the Quarry Lands are right in the middle of a residential neighbourhood with all the resulting infrastructure.

"A number of borrow pits (soil taken for infill elsewhere) have been excavated and subsequently infilled using imported materials over the past century," said Don Logie, senior vice-president, development, Build Toronto.

"Additional fills have also been placed over nearly the entirety of the property to raise the overall grade. These present both geotechnical challenges related to relatively poor bearing capacities on loosely-placed fill, as well as environmental challenges related to the environmental quality of the materials used as backfill. In addition, the site is crisscrossed by major trunk utilities which, for the most part, cannot be moved."

He said Build Toronto has hired environmental engineering and geosciences consultant Terrapex Environmental Ltd to undertake the environmental site assessment process working with the Ontario Ministry of Environment to complete the Record of Site Condition.

Despite some initial fears, it does not appear as though the known contaminants are moving, he added.

"The environmental contaminants at the property are largely related to historical in-fill soil contaminants that are essentially immobile," he said. "We do not expect migration of contaminants off site."

Soil treatment will be on-site but that will present some challenges with the underground infrastructure and nearby residence.

"We will construct risk management measures to mitigate any potential exposures from the soil and groundwater," he said, adding Terrapex will be handling it. "It will be similar to that which has been

used in the waterfront areas — the West Don Lands (including Corktown Commons park) and East Bayfront area (the Corus building on Queens Quay East).”

The experience gleaned from these projects — along with best practices and innovation — will be drawn upon, he said, and the MOE will be ensuring standards.

In any event, the Quarry Lands, at least the City of Toronto-owned portions have a long way to go before soil remediation starts. The planning process is still in the early stage and density plans are just about ready to be presented to the Scarborough council for approvals in principle before being passed back to City Council. Traffic and sewer impact studies have also yet to be commissioned. It could be three or four years before work actually begins in earnest.

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