

# NOVÆ RES URBIS TORONTO

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TRANSFORMATIVE REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT FOR FORMER AIRPORT LANDS HEADING DOWN THE RUNWAY

## TAKING FLIGHT IN DOWNSVIEW

Matt Durnan

Once-in-a-generation project is set to transform the former Downsview airport lands into a massive new connected and complete community that will add housing, parkland and open space, while maintaining the legacy of the area as an integral employment district.

Canada Lands Company and Northcrest Developments have submitted an application for an official plan amendment for the 210-hectare site in Downsview to permit a major redevelopment that would consist of 46,000 residential units, 40 hectares of new parks and public open spaces and a reimagining of the airport's two-kilometre runway that would transform it into an animated public and pedestrian-oriented open space.

The official plan amendment is the second step in the process of redeveloping the lands, after a successful appeal of Official Plan 231 in 2021 to redesignate the

lands, which were previously designated 'employment' to 'regeneration'.

In 2018, after **Bombardier** announced that it would be vacating the lands at the end of 2023, Northcrest was able to acquire the runway and

manufacturing lands on the east side of the rail corridor that bisects the site from Sheppard Avenue to the north down to Wilson Avenue to the south.

**Canada Lands Company**, an arms-length commercial crown corporation whose

mandate is to acquire surplus federal property across the country and redevelop it, owns the remaining portion of the site on both the east and west sides of the tracks and has been working alongside Northcrest since 2018, mapping out the vision for the site.

Their framework plan includes 10 different districts within the more than 200-hectare site, wrapping around Downsview Park to the west and the Park Commons. The development would come online in three phases, starting with the lands owned by Canada Lands Company at

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Rendering of the redevelopment concept for the runway on the former Downsview airport lands. A proposed redevelopment by Northcrest and Canada Lands Company would transform the approximately two-kilometre runway into a north-south pedestrian connection spanning the site.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

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the northwest portion of the site projected to start redevelopment in 2025 and to be completed by 2031.

Integral to the planning of the new community was addressing the question of how it could be seamlessly integrated into the surrounding neighbourhoods and determining where to create connections to the nearby Downsview Park.

“Some of the principles when you’re looking at something this big and this open is stitching the runway and the hangar areas—all of this area that has been previously fenced off—and how do you stitch that back into the existing neighbourhoods that surround the site?” **City of Toronto** planner and project director for Update Downsview, **Sarah Phipps** told *NRU*.

“It’s: ‘how do we get over the rail corridor that goes through the site, how do we stitch back to the Allen district to the east and how do we get back to Downsview Park and even further on to the west side of Keele?’ So, that’s getting the transportation network up and going, and then it’s the parks and open space and making sure that we have those large areas of parks and open space that will frame all of the development blocks.”

Launched by the **City of Toronto** in the wake of Bombardier’s 2018 announcement, Update Downsview will update the existing 2011 Downsview Area secondary plan. The new secondary plan will set out the long-term vision for a complete community centred around transit investment, job creation, parks and open spaces and community services and facilities.

The potential for the Downsview lands is significant as the site comes ready-made for transit access with three

TTC subway stations – Wilson, Sheppard West and Downsview Park - in close proximity, along with the Downsview Park GO station.

“The opportunity here is incredible, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime planner’s dream to be working on, and Canada Lands and Northcrest assembled a team with a broad extensive multi-disciplinary approach to studying it,” **Urban Strategies** partner **Emily Reisman** told *NRU*.

“Through the engagement process, the idea of connectivity was heard loud and clear at first. Folks living on the east side of the Downsview lands wanted to be able to get to Downsview Park or the subway station. Folks living in Ancaster [Park] to the south wanted to be able to access those things,

but because of the rail line or the fences around the airport [they] have had a limited ability to do so.”

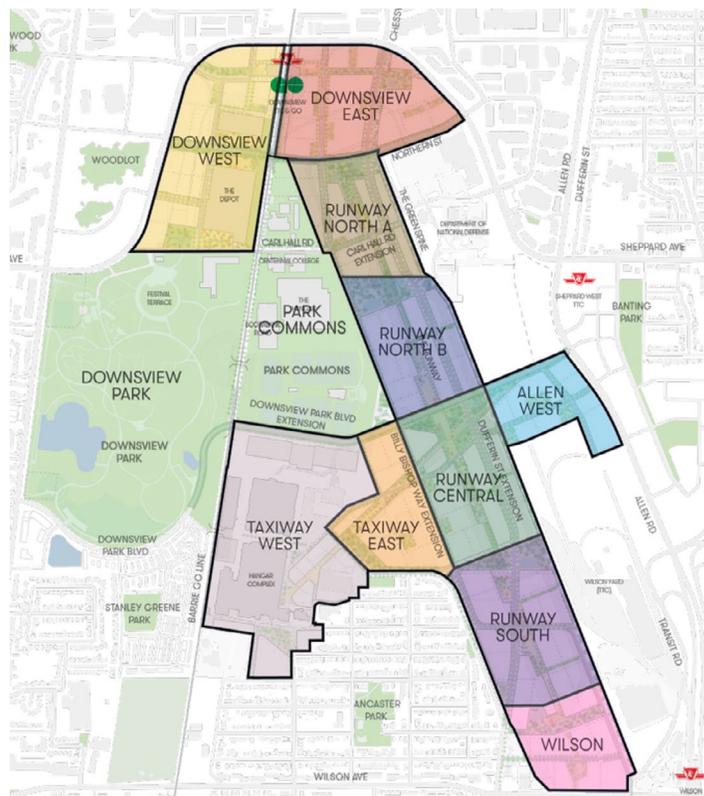
The development partners are excited about the prospect of further activating Downsview Park through the connections that will be created with this new community, bringing a somewhat hidden gem to the forefront.

“Downsview Park has evolved over the last decade-and-a-half to already be a much-loved piece of the local community. But not as many people know about it as should. And the programming of the park is phenomenal, but not as many people take advantage of it as they should,” Canada Lands Company regional director of real estate **David Anselmi** told *NRU*.

“I think what we’re planning on doing by way of connectivity and bringing the community closer to it, with a new emerging community is really going to launch [Downsview Park] to its highest level of success and we’re really excited about it.”

While the developers are

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District map of the planned 10 districts on the Downsview lands. Canada Lands Company and Northcrest Developments have submitted an official plan amendment application to permit a massive redevelopment of the more than 210-hectare former airport site that would include the development of more than 46,000 residential units, 100 acres of parks and open space and 12-million square feet of employment space.

SOURCE: ID80DOWNSVIEW

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committed to a huge amount of residential development that will bring more than 46,000 units and will house an estimated more than 80,000 people, they are working to ensure that the development truly is a complete community, with a significant amount of employment uses mixed in, to the tune of roughly 12-million square feet.

“Each of those 10 districts will be a truly mixed-use district because they’re all quite large. They’re all around 40 to 60 acres, and we want each of them to have all of the various benefits of a complete community,” Anselmi said.

City of Toronto ward 6 York Centre councillor **James Pasternak** has been keeping close tabs on the plans for the Downsview lands since the Bombardier announcement. He was involved throughout the roughly 18-month public engagement process that Northcrest and Canada Lands conducted.

“We’ve made it quite clear that this is not going to be a congested, unlivable condo forest. We want this to be transformative, we want it to be unique, we want it to be a good balance of affordable and market housing. We want to add another 100 acres of parkland to the site, and none

of the current Downsview Park will be touched. And we want to respect the local,

stable established communities surrounding it,” Pasternak told *NRU*.

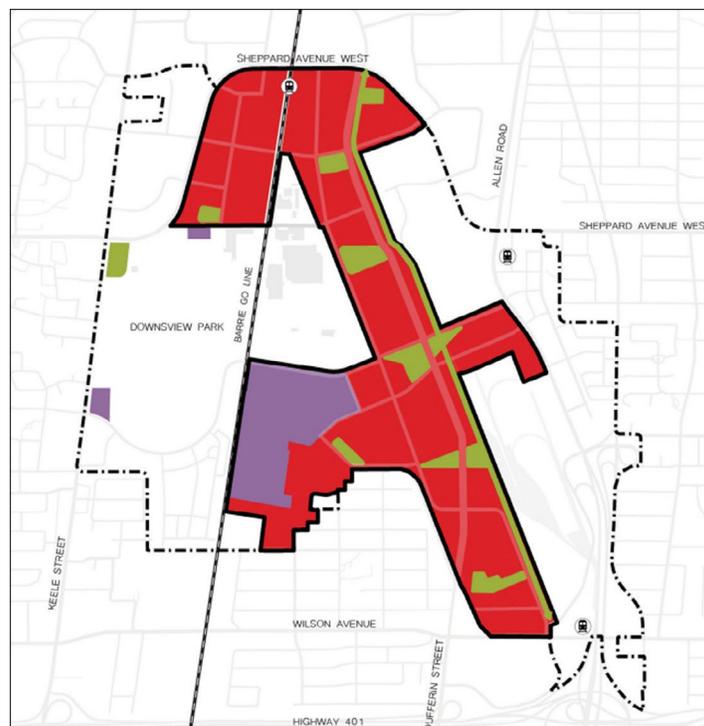
The housing mix is slated to be mostly mid-rise multi-unit residential buildings, with the taller buildings situated closer to the subway stations that surround the site – Sheppard West TTC to the east, Wilson

TTC to the south and the Downsview Park GO station to the north.

“It’s really not about cramming the maximum amount of units in at all, and this is really intended to be comfortable density, with densities of 3.5 [times the FSI] near the transit stations and 2.5 times [FSI] along the majority of the runway,” Reisman said.

“There’s some variety around where the hangars are and where the existing depot building is, but it’s not about cramming them in. And you look at the proposal and the 100 acres of new publicly accessible parks and open space—that’s really significant and this is really being led by thinking about the public realm. The team thought about making connections, and the way you do that is through public realm—whether it’s parks or streets or other open spaces and linkages—that are the backbone of new

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Aerial photograph of the former Downsview airport lands. In 2018, Bombardier announced they would be vacating the lands at the end of 2023. Canada Lands Company and Northcrest Developments have submitted an official plan amendment seeking to redevelop the massive site into a mixed-use complete community.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

Proposed land use plan for the former Downsview airport lands redevelopment. The red area would be designated as mixed-use, while the purple area is general employment and the green areas represent parkland.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

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communities.”

In addition to new housing and an abundance of public open space, the framework plan also gives a nod to the legacy of the site as a hub for innovation during its time as an aviation and aerospace centre by ensuring that significant employment opportunities are included in the plans for the site.

“I think that legacy and spirit of innovation is driving the concepts for bringing employment to the site and making sure that it’s a place that is full of good jobs and creative jobs and to create opportunity for the neighbourhoods as well,” Reisman said.

Similar to transit infrastructure already being established in the area, the site comes equipped with employment infrastructure to a degree, in the form of massive hangars that are planned to be retrofitted for employment uses, with housing surrounding them.

“The term ‘complete community’ is very important. If you’re building housing without recreational assets, or daycares, or parkland, it becomes rundown very quickly because it doesn’t have the importance of livability,” said Pasternak.

“I believe those partners

Canada Lands and Northcrest are very committed to that, and they understand the importance of building a sustainable community.”

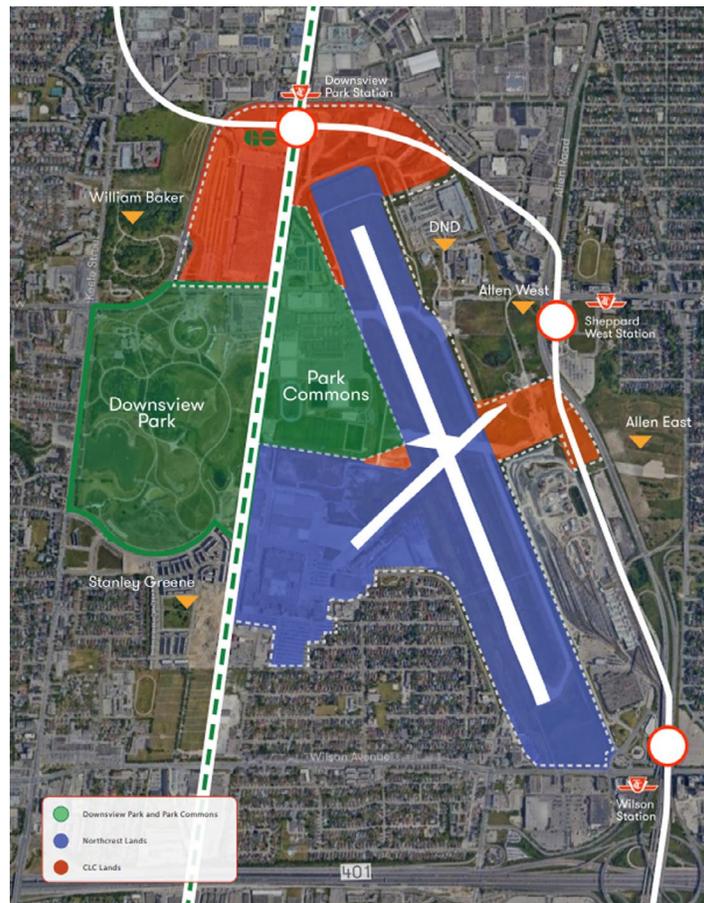
The partnership between the two has been seamless, according to Anselmi, and the shared vision between the two landowners bodes well for the future of the neighbourhood.

“I think the real magic here is that there are two long-term landowners. Neither of us are going away, and we’ve decided to work cooperatively and collaboratively to do this plan.

And there’s going to be some amazing benefits to us making that early decision,” said Anselmi.

“A lot of landowners work together to get a subdivision put together, but that’s not what we’re talking about here. We’re talking about creating this amazing new vision for this property.”

The official plan amendment is expected to be tabled for discussion during the City of Toronto’s planning and housing committee meeting in April, with the landowners anticipating a final decision to be made before the end of 2023.



Left: Map of the former Downsview airport lands that are subject to a massive redevelopment proposal by a pair of landowners. Canada Lands Company owns the lands highlighted red, while Northcrest Developments owns the lands highlighted blue.

SOURCE: URBAN STRATEGIES

Below: Illustration of the phased approach being proposed for the redevelopment of the former Downsview airport lands. Phase one would start in 2025 and run until 2031 and would include a new street underpass under the GO transit tracks, along with bridges connecting to the nearby Downsview Park to the west.

SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

