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Bring on the jets at the island airport: Richard Florida

The benefits of having and expanding Toronto's island airport far exceed the costs.



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An airplane prepares to land at Billy Bishop airport on Toronto Island. The success of the airport so far suggests that many of the concerns about its planned expansion are misplaced, writes Richard Florida.

By: Richard Florida Published on Tue Dec 17 2013

Many of my urbanist friends are against the [proposed expansion](#) of Toronto's island airport. They say that allowing jets will damage Toronto's prized waterfront, hurt surrounding neighbourhoods, and increase congestion. These are all people I admire, and they make valid points. Their conviction has impelled me to look closely at this issue. I've weighed the pros and cons. I've looked at the research on how airports affect the economic development of cities. Based on all of the findings, I've come to conclude that the benefit of having and expanding the airport far exceeds the costs. And that's why I'm for jets at the island airport.

There are lots of studies linking airports to the economic development of cities. The broad conclusion is that airports play a huge role in creating jobs and boosting the economies of the cities they are in. As John Kasarda, the University of North Carolina professor and co-author of *Aerotropolis* points out, airports are to the 21st century what highways were to the 20th — and what railroads and seaports were to the 19th and 18th centuries respectively: critical infrastructure allowing regions to connect and compete. If cities are the primary economic engines of the 21st-century global economy and people are their fuel, then airports are the essential pipelines that keep cities humming.

When my colleagues and I at the [Martin Prosperity Institute](#) took a close look at the role of airports in economic development, we were frankly surprised by how strongly airports affect city economies. Most economists agree that two key factors shape the ability of cities to grow and prosper: technology-based industry and talented people. Airports, according to our analysis, played a greater role than clusters of high-tech industry, and about the same as concentrations of high-tech people. That's way too huge to ignore or neglect.

Airports play a major role in city economies by increasing the circulation of goods, people and ideas. Here Toronto has an additional advantage. Pearson airport can continue to play its role as Toronto's main airport, and especially as its primary industrial hub for moving goods in and out of the region. But Billy Bishop airport moves an even more critical type of cargo in and out Toronto: people, and the ideas, connections and creativity they carry with them.

Most of all, the island airport is an urban hub connecting Toronto to such major global gateway cities as New York, Boston, Chicago or Washington, D.C. And it is situated right in the city centre, right downtown. Not on the edge of downtown, not 20 minutes from downtown, but right at the base of the city's central business district.

The island airport is among the best advertisements for Toronto. At a time when our mayor has dragged the city's reputation into the dumps, flyers who come into Toronto from New York, Boston, Washington and Chicago rave about the view, the service and the ability to land right in the centre of downtown. It makes commuting to and from one of these major gateways a breeze, and it solidifies the critical connections Toronto has to these global cities — all of which further enhances economic development.

Imagine the added benefits in terms of connectivity and the flow of people and ideas when the island airport can connect our downtown to West Coast cities like Vancouver, Los Angeles and San Francisco, and perhaps someday even to Europe's great global gateways like London, Amsterdam, Paris, Frankfurt and more.

The main [objections to jets on the island](#) — increased traffic, noise and air pollution — aren't insurmountable. It's not like there's no airport there at all: There are already planes coming in and out of Billy Bishop. And such complaints discount the revolution that's taking place in airplane technology, and pooh-pooh the fact the downtown airport will be served with state-of-the-art quiet jets made in Canada.

Big cities like New York, Miami, and Washington already have much larger and busier airports close to their downtowns with much noisier and bigger jets flying overhead. And it's not as though Billy Bishop is about to turn into JFK: Jet traffic at the island airport is limited by the fact that there is only one runway and a set number of landing spots. There will only ever be so many jets flying in and out of downtown Toronto.

Expanding flights at the island airport gives travellers an alternative to the long commute from downtown to Pearson, reducing energy use and car emissions. Along with the Union Pearson Express, which is expected to open in 2015, an expanded Billy Bishop airport will help alleviate congestion and ease travel in and out of the city.

A working airport on the downtown harbour can be a good thing. It shows that the waterfront is a place to work as well as live and play. Sydney, Australia, has long considered its waterfront a working harbour with industrial port facilities alongside upscale housing, shopping and restaurant districts. The same is true of working harbours and ports from New York to Miami to L.A. The ability to support high-paying blue-collar and service jobs at the island airport can send a strong unambiguous signal that downtown Toronto is a place where all classes — the working class, service workers, and the knowledge-based creative class — can thrive.

Of course, the livability of our city remains key. And great neighbourhoods need to be protected. The city needs to do its due diligence and ensure the new jets meet all the necessary standards for noise and emissions. But council should be working toward 21st-century infrastructure solutions, not putting up obstacles before the research is even in.

As with most big, important steps in life, there are risks and costs. But in this case, the benefits far outweigh them.

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