

Doug Ford is right to expand Billy Bishop airport and bring it, and Toronto, to new heights

RICHARD FLORIDA

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published May 20 2026, 6:00AM

Updated May 21 2026, 1:15PM



Ontario Premier Doug Ford speaks at an event at Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport in March. Nothing embodies Toronto's urban identity more than a working airport on its waterfront, writes Richard Florida.

FRANK GUNN/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Richard Florida is university professor at the University of Toronto, visiting distinguished professor at Vanderbilt University, and visiting distinguished fellow at the Kresge Foundation. He authored a 2023 report on Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport commissioned by PortsToronto.

On a flight back from New York to Billy Bishop airport last fall, the man beside me could not stop talking about his commute. A software consultant with an MBA from Cornell, he had dropped his daughter at school that morning, pedalled a bike share to the airport, and arrived in Manhattan well in time for his 10:30 a.m. meeting. Now he was headed home to Toronto in time to make his daughter's soccer practice. He had no idea I was an urbanist who writes about cities; he just wanted to tell me about the difference it makes to his family.

Billy Bishop Toronto City Airport is one of the most important economic assets in this city. It connects Toronto directly to New York, Boston, Chicago, Washington, and other major North American business centres. It also holds out the promise of becoming something even rarer: The world's first truly walkable, mixed-use urban airport on a downtown lakefront.

That is why the Ontario government's proposal to expand Billy Bishop makes sense for Toronto's future. It would extend the runway to allow modern jets that are quieter and more fuel-efficient than current turboprops to operate at the airport. These aircraft would better connect downtown Toronto to other leading industry clusters – San Francisco's AI and tech cluster, Hollywood and Vancouver's film and entertainment industries, Miami's finance, lifestyle and real estate economy, and the energy hubs of Calgary, Denver and Houston.

What's going on with Billy Bishop Airport and Ford's cellphone records,
according to our Queen's Park reporters

Airports are about much more than transportation. They move people, ideas and deals – the flows that power the global economy. They are key factors in economic competitiveness, alongside clusters of high-tech industry and concentrations of educated, creative talent.

Cities today are morphing into globe-straddling networks I call meta cities that link the world's leading hubs to one another and to the rising cities around them. Toronto falls into the third tier of these meta cities, behind New York and London at the top as well as rising competitors such as Dubai and Singapore, all anchored by airports that connect them to other leading cities across the world.

Many of the world's great cities operate more than one major airport. New York has John F. Kennedy, LaGuardia and Newark. London has Heathrow, Gatwick and London City. A substantial body of research shows that multiple airports strengthen a city's economy by providing greater geographic access, serving different types of travellers, expanding overall connectivity, and easing capacity pressure.

Poillievre backs Billy Bishop airport expansion as Liberals face pressure to oppose plan

Billy Bishop is often called Toronto's downtown airport, and that location matters more today than ever. Toronto's downtown has yet to fully recover from the pandemic shutdowns. What powers downtowns now is not workers but visitors. Across North America's largest downtowns, visitors now make up about 60 per cent of activity, workers 30 per cent, and residents 10 per cent. Billy Bishop brings tourists and business travellers directly into Toronto's downtown core – an advantage few if any other cities can match.

The world's leading companies are building new headquarters directly atop their cities' major rail and transit hubs to make commutes more seamless for their workers. In New York, JPMorgan Chase's new headquarters and the signature One Vanderbilt tower rise above Grand Central Terminal, while BlackRock and Pfizer have built their new headquarters at Hudson Yards, atop a new transit hub. In London, Google and Meta anchor King's Cross, the city's largest rail station.

There may be much to criticize about how Premier Doug Ford is carrying out his expansion plan. He'd moved unilaterally, sidelining the city of Toronto, and his government could not answer simple questions on the technical details. But the underlying idea is not just sound but transformational.

The debate over Billy Bishop Airport has too often been framed as a choice between a busy airport and a quiet park. But great waterfronts, like great downtowns and great cities, are not one thing or another. They are bustling mixes of activity – the messy urbanism that is part of Toronto's DNA. A downtown airport is an irreplaceable element of that mix.

Nothing embodies Toronto's urban identity more than a working airport on its waterfront – quiet planes overhead, just steps above cruise ships, industrial facilities, film studios, neighbourhoods, towers and sports stadiums that energize the city. It can also be a signal of Toronto's renewed global ambition – a sustainable airport, woven into an urban neighbourhood, connecting its downtown to other great cities of our time.