



February 2023

Open letter to Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF)

We are writing to express our dismay that TIFF, a Canadian cultural treasure, is partnering with Austrian-based Therme Group's Canadian subsidiary, whose planned private spa will destroy Ontario Place.

TIFF's [mission statement](#) says, "We are committed to treating all individuals with respect, dignity and fairness by removing physical, social and economic barriers to participation." How does turning public parkland into a private waterpark jibe with those inclusionary values?

The film festival [says](#) it is partnering with the global waterpark company "to celebrate the importance of art, build stronger communities through the shared experience of film, and promote the role of art and film in creating more human cities."

But Therme Group's proposal is about destruction, loss, not creation. It would privatize actively used public land. More than 800 trees on Ontario Place's West Island will be cut down. Acres of public parkland will be lost and flattened, replaced by a nine-storey high glass structure, home to an expensive spa. A sensitive ecosystem on the lake's edge will be thrown into chaos in order to build a five-storey underground parking garage. On the East portion of the site, even more public land will be engulfed by Live Nation; both of these spaces are exempt from the Environmental Assessment process as private developments.

In all, it's a boondoggle costing hundreds of millions of dollars, to be paid by Ontarians.

The vital need for public space has been made starkly apparent over the pandemic. Our parks, green spaces and recreation areas are critical to connect with community and family, providing both individual and collective benefits. Cities around the world have realized the importance of maximizing access to public space - these areas are particularly essential to physical and psychological well-being in urban settings. Environments like Ontario Place meet these needs for thousands and have the capacity for even greater reach. The current redevelopment proposal does the opposite.

TIFF director Cameron Bailey has [praised](#) “the spectacular setting of the world’s first IMAX cinema.” The hulking proposed waterpark is nothing like the iconic Cinesphere in architectural value and will completely overshadow it.

In 2017, when TIFF presented [screenings](#) of Graeme Ferguson’s North of Superior – the first film to be shown at the Cinesphere – the screenings were free. That’s because TIFF recognizes that art and culture are public goods and should be accessible to all the people of Ontario. How does a for-profit, foreign-owned spa, which will cost hundreds of dollars for a family to visit, mesh with this vision? It doesn’t make sense. We do not believe it to be in the public interest to privatize invaluable public space that Ontario Place currently provides.

Further, the process of public consultation has been flawed from the outset with the predetermination that the site would be handed to the private sector. To date, no public consultation has included the West Island and proposed Therme site. The terms of the lease are unknown, and it was signed before the required completion of a Strategic Conservation Plan. The lack of meaningful and genuine consultation is emblematic of this current provincial government’s approach to civic participation.

Please listen to your supporters, who have spoken out against this ill-conceived collaboration. We ask that TIFF reconsider its partnership with Therme; the move stands against the organizational values of inclusivity. A private spa is not a public good. Ontario Place was created for all to celebrate the story and future of Ontario. TIFF, which strives to enrich Canada’s cultural landscape should be particularly concerned with participating in the loss of that narrative.

Ontario Place for All



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Our Core Principles

- Ontario Place must be for ALL and kept publicly accessible.
- There must be a thoughtful, comprehensive public review before any changes, with a full and robust public consultation that:
 - conforms to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report's call for informed, respectful and meaningful consultation with Indigenous peoples over economic development
 - recognizes the diverse communities that use and contribute to Ontario Place
- Public interest, not commercial interest must drive the new vision.
- Future plans must
 - acknowledge the waterfront's Indigenous heritage and incorporate meaningful Indigenous consultation
 - maintain Ontario Place as part of Toronto's waterfront park system.
 - be integrated with the revitalization of Exhibition Place.
 - celebrate Ontario.
 - be guided by a collaboratively developed Conservation Management Plan that sustains Ontario Place as a recognized cultural heritage landscape.