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Gardiner stands between Toronto and a better future: Richard Florida

Keeping the Gardiner East up is a false solution for Toronto's worsening traffic woes. Tearing it down, meanwhile, would create a world of opportunity.



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Taking down the Gardiner East is the most fiscally prudent and economically viable option available to the city, writes Richard Florida.

By: Richard Florida Published on Thu Jun 04 2015

The Gardiner East must come down.

Open policard for Mayor John Tory



Open policard for Councillor Rob Ford



Toronto has a once-in-a-lifetime chance to remake its downtown landscape, to make it more attractive, establish a better connection to the waterfront, and spur real estate development. It needs to take it.

At a time when great cities around the world are tearing down their urban freeways, Toronto wants to spend nearly a billion dollars (\$919 million) rebuilding ours. The situation is as tragic as it is absurd.

I like and admire John Tory ([open John Tory's policard](#)) and find him a terrific antidote to Rob Ford ([open Rob Ford's policard](#)), but if the mayor is really the city-builder he says he is, he'll listen to the tidal wave of urbanists and transportation experts saying it's time to remove the Gardiner East

The mayor says that he “didn’t get elected to make traffic worse,” adding that “removing that piece of the Gardiner will almost certainly make traffic worse.”

But keeping the Gardiner East up is a false solution for Toronto’s worsening traffic woes. Just 3 per cent of the trips into the downtown core come from the Gardiner East, a minuscule number compared to the more than two thirds (68 per cent) who get downtown on public transportation.

While the mayor claims that the so-called hybrid option (which would only take down the Gardiner east of the Don River leading to Logan Ave. and actually build new ramps at Cherry St.) will save two or three minutes, transportation experts suggest that removing the highway will ultimately have very little, if any impact, on commuting times.

A chorus of urbanists and established experts including Toronto’s Chief City Planner Jennifer Keesmaat and Chief Health Officer Dr. David McKeown, as well as former mayor David Crombie, former chief planner [Paul Bedford](#), the Council for Canadian Urbanism and many others, say it’s time for the Gardiner to go.

Removing the outmoded highway is also the option most favoured by the public. A recent poll found that 45 per cent of Torontonians supported the “tear down” option.

Taking down the Gardiner East is the most fiscally prudent and economically viable option. According to the city’s own report, the proposed boulevard and its corresponding infrastructure is the most affordable to build and maintain.

The downtown core is running out of developable land. The east Bayfront and the Port Lands are the last significant central areas for economic development. The downtown is in the midst of a tremendous boom not just for residential condominiums and apartments, but for commercial uses and office buildings as well. The city can use the land around the Gardiner for much needed development. The boulevard option facilitates both their development and their connectivity to downtown.

Density and interaction are key to increasing innovation and productivity in the increasingly urban knowledge economy. Our city and region will continue to benefit from a denser, extended live-work downtown connected to the waterfront. We can no longer afford to subsidize a sprawling growth model with out-of-date highways and long car commutes.

With the upcoming Pan Am Games, Toronto is signalling its status as a global city to the world. But it stands as an exception, endeavouring to keep its outmoded white elephant of a highway while forward-looking cities like New York, San Francisco, Rio de Janeiro, and Madrid are removing theirs. Just last year, the Gardiner ranked third on the Congress for New Urbanism’s list of Freeways Without Futures.

The mayor seems to believe that Toronto can compete and grow as global city based on freeways and cars. But the region is already long past the point where cars represent a viable way to get around.

Cars work in small regions of perhaps a couple of million people. But once a metro reaches five or six million people, cars can no longer get the job done. Congestion snarls traffic and the all-important urban metabolism — the movement of people, goods and ideas that power growth — begins to slow. This is why all great global cities are dense, walkable, mixed-use, and serviced by transit.

On this issue, both the weight of the evidence and the opinion of the public are clear. By [voting](#) to remove the Gardiner, the council will show real leadership and confidence in the city’s future.

It’s time to move our city forward, not maintain a crumbling relic of the past.

Richard Florida is director of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto’s Rotman School of Management.