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Water area wins raves from visitors

2.6 million people visit last year, despite SARS Parking, crowds seen as only bad points

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Torontonians may complain about the concrete curtain of high rises lining the waterfront on Queens Quay W. But it doesn't stop them from flocking to the area in droves to stroll by the lake or take in the eclectic range of arts and cultural activities put on by Harbourfront Centre, a new survey suggests.

More than 2.6 million people visited Harbourfront Centre's four-hectare site south of Queens Quay between York and Rees Sts. last year despite SARS and an unusually wet spring, says the survey by Ekos Research Associates Inc.

The vast majority of those visitors are from Greater Toronto with 58 per cent coming from Toronto and another 14 per cent from Peel, York and Durham regions.

Of all GTA residents, two-thirds have been to the site, including 4 in 10 in the past year.

The \$250,000 survey funded by Heritage Canada for Harbourfront is believed to be the largest and most in-depth probe of any Canadian arts or cultural institution. It also found:

- ★ The average visitor logged about six visits in 2003.
- ★ While 3 in 10 visitors attended a specific event at Harbourfront, 7 in 10 went to simply browse, with 50 per cent of those saying they go to walk by the lake.
- ★ 30 per cent of Canadians who visit Toronto have been to Harbourfront.
- ★ Visitors came from a diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and were of all ages.
- ★ More than 90 per cent of visitors report they were satisfied with their experience, including 76 per cent who say they were "very satisfied."
- ★ Almost all visitors (97 per cent) say they are likely to return, including more than 80 per cent who say they are "very likely" to do so.
- ★ For those who didn't visit last year, congestion and parking issues were the largest reasons for not doing so.

The survey included 17,000 visitor questionnaires and 2,000 follow-up telephone interviews conducted between April and December of last year. Another 2,000 residents were randomly selected from the GTA and Canada for interviews.

Although the survey didn't ask specific questions about Toronto's stalled redevelopment plans in the eastern port lands, it points to a thirst for a lively water's edge among both GTA residents and tourists in general," said Ekos Research Director Charles Graves.

"The high numbers of people coming just to stroll by the lake shows that people are drawn to the water ... it's

extremely telling in my view."

Waterfront residents say the survey supports their belief that Ottawa should be paying more attention to the city's relationship with the lake.

As part of the federal election, about 20 residents' groups and other stakeholders from Etobicoke to the Eastern Beaches are sponsoring an all-party debate on Toronto's waterfront on June 16 between 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. at Harbourfront's CIBC outdoor stage.

They have invited representatives of the Green Party, the Conservatives, the Liberals and the NDP. While the Liberals and NDP have not confirmed which candidates will speak for their respective parties, debate organizers are hoping Liberal MP Dennis Mills and NDP Leader [Jack Layton](#), both vying for the Toronto-Danforth seat, will attend.

"They are the two main waterfront contenders and this will be their one chance to get all the waterfront stakeholders together," said Ane Christensen, president of the Harbourfront Community Association.

The city's battle to get Ottawa and the Toronto Port Authority to cancel a planned bridge to the Island Airport and the future of the Waterfront Revitalization Corp., formed three years ago by Ottawa, Queen's Park and the city to redevelop the Toronto's lake front, will be among the many issues addressed in the debate, Christensen said.

The high percentage of visitors in the Ekos study who said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience suggests Harbourfront is doing something right on the lake, Graves said.

The only area where Harbourfront showed even slightly poor ratings was on parking availability or affordability. And that was among people who hadn't visited Harbourfront in the past year, Graves said.

"What's surprising is that there was just such a strong affinity for Harbourfront Centre among people who come here — and it isn't an exclusive crowd," he said. "They look at Harbourfront Centre as a little jewel on the waterfront among the condominium construction and the other controversies on the water."

Harbourfront Executive Director Bill Boyle said the study has lessons for the entire Toronto lakefront.

"We've never had the hard data. But now I think this shows how passionate people in the GTA are about the waterfront. It shows they want to be here. They want to be in a place where there's activity happening and exciting cultural events," he said.

"The fact that Harbourfront is attracting this type of visitation — despite what we've gone through over the last 15 years, really bodes well for the entire future of the waterfront."

When asked what they wanted to see more of, visitors said they wanted more of the innovative, creative programming that Harbourfront already provides, Boyle added.

"We have an amazing, fantastic diversity of people who live here and they want to see themselves represented and celebrated. And that's what should happen right across the waterfront."

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