

Chapter 6

Planning for Future Places to Live and Enjoy

On a hot, August afternoon during our watershed travels we were privileged to speak with a delegation from the community of Harwood. Harwood is a small town on the south shore of Rice Lake – a mixture of families that have been there for generations and residents and cottagers who have come more recently.

For a time, many decades ago, a railway ran from Cobourg to Harwood and thence by a short-lived trestle across the lake. The waterfront at Harwood is an expression of the traditional identity of the place and essential to the vision they have for the future. In their efforts at “place building”, they would like to transform their waterfront and suggested that the panel might urge senior orders of government to support their efforts.

We heard similar stories from many other communities throughout the watersheds and particularly along the waterway. We noticed a commonality in their messages. Communities are trying to figure out how they can be revitalized; how their presence on water can best serve their citizens; how to position themselves in an increasingly competitive market; how to embrace tourism; how to make the most of economic opportunities; and how to handle increasing demand for recreational space from a growing population elsewhere.

In this chapter, we invite governments and communities to work together to respond creatively to the growing demand for access to the water – demand that originates from the growth of “lifestyle” communities along the shore and demand that comes from the growing population of the Greater Toronto Area. The lakes and rivers throughout the watershed are and will be a “destination” for many years to come supporting both the economic and social well-being of communities.

Throughout our process we came to broadly understand that the social and economic environment of the waterway region is changing. Retiring baby boomers from the Greater Toronto Area increasingly call it home. A recent informal survey by the Federation of Ontario Cottagers suggests that upwards of 60 per cent of cottages are now being used year-round.²⁵ Houses are gradually replacing cottages as a waterfront icon. Fractional ownership, condominiums, and major lifestyle developments are emerging. Technology allows more workers to “telecommute” from the waterway region to Toronto or elsewhere.

Planners from municipalities and conservation authorities provided us with information on the rapid shifts from seasonal to year-round residential development and the accompanying array of new service and amenity requirements. Our own research confirmed this phenomenon and documented the billion-dollar-a-year economic importance of residential occupancy of the shoreline.

Tourism operators spoke to us of changes in the configuration of recreational accommodation. Traditional family and fishing lodges, marinas and resorts are disappearing and are being replaced by high-end resorts, condominiums and fractional ownership developments that generate more economic return. The facilities that are disappearing are those that serve ordinary Canadian families. Replacement developments are being designed to serve a more upscale market.

²⁵ Winter 2007/08 Readers’ Panel, *Cottage Life* magazine.

We also heard from seasonal residents who have cottages that can only be accessed by boat. The closure of marinas is of great concern to them.

We attempted to better understand the nature of changes in recreational boating. There is an increasing number of boats on the waterway. The Ontario Marine Operators Association estimates 40,000 although, in the absence of an effective boat registration system, accurate numbers are impossible to determine. Meanwhile, fewer boats are using the locks – lock usage has declined by almost a half since 1988. The reasons for this are not clearly understood.

It is important to add a note about the social and economic importance of the recreational fishery. The Federation of Anglers and Hunters of Ontario provided us with an excellent sense of the economic importance of this fishery supported by an outstanding presentation in Lindsay by a representative of the Bassmasters organization.

Finally, we sense that there is a severe recreational supply and demand crisis emerging in the waterway corridor that, if not addressed, will be the source of increasing social conflict. By 2031, the population of the Greater Golden Horseshoe is projected to grow by a further 3.7 million people. This new population will be very culturally diverse.²⁶ Where will these families go to enjoy the water on a hot summer day – enjoyment that is a quintessential part of the Canadian dream? Most of the land along the shore is privately owned. We were told that public recreational open space that does exist along the waterway has reached its optimum carrying capacity. Yet demand continues to grow.

There is also evidence of growing social conflict along the waterway associated with changing patterns of use and availability of access. For several years lock staff have reported conflicts between boaters and shore-based visitors. Residents and cottagers along the Severn River and elsewhere are concerned about illegal camping adjacent to their properties and have fears about their own safety. Many told us about issues with garbage and human waste associated with increasing use. Recently, the Ontario Human Rights Commission issued a Preliminary Report on its investigation into incidents of harassment involving Asian fishers and local residents. Among other conclusions, the Commission observed that:

...it seems clear from the submissions to this inquiry that the competition over water resources has taken on a very disturbing racial overtone in some communities, and the Commission urges conservation and waterway authorities to take action to address these issues.²⁷

It is imperative that governments at all levels better understand the changes that are occurring in both residential and recreational demand along the shores of the waterway. That understanding and the strategic support of senior levels of government can, in our view, enable communities to better respond to those changes while protecting the cultural and natural values that make the region so attractive.

Preparing a New Strategic Plan

In our chapter on “Improving the Performance of Governments” we refer to the Canada-Ontario Rideau-Trent-Severn Study (CORTS) that began in 1967. This was a joint Canada-Ontario project launched to study the recreational potential of the lands and waters along the navigation corridors between Ottawa and Georgian

²⁶ Ontario, Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal. 2006. *Places to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe*, p. 12. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: <http://www.pir.gov.on.ca/Engl/hg/growth/gghdocs/FPLAN-ENG-WEB-ALL.pdf>.

²⁷ Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2007, *Preliminary Findings – Inquiry Into Assaults on Asian Canadian Anglers*. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca>. December.

Bay. Staff from 15 provincial and federal departments produced the 1971 report entitled *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*.²⁸ In our view this wide-ranging report remains a model of forward-thinking, visionary, strategic planning.

The CORTS report stated that the “recreational environment of the Rideau-Trent-Severn Corridor is approaching a state of crisis”.²⁹ Today, 37 years after that report was written, the corridor faces the same – and in many ways much more severe – challenges and issues. More shoreline has been lost to development; publicly accessible shoreline is disappearing; environmental health is deteriorating; and communities are struggling in isolation to respond to the challenges. And these issues are being experienced throughout the entire watershed.

It is our recommendation that the governments of Canada and Ontario join together with the Heritage Region Council to review and modernize the 1971 plan to address the challenges we see emerging today.

A modern plan would:

- Seek to better understand and respond to the changes in recreational use and the requirements of a regional population that is very different from that of several decades ago;
- Provide for the needs of the growing number of people that live in the region reflecting the emerging planning principle that amenities that are attractive to people who live in a community will serve as attractions to those who might visit;
- Address the importance and sustainability of the recreational fishery;
- Identify how tens of thousands of new day users from the Greater Toronto Area will be accommodated;
- Identify the scenic, natural and cultural landscapes that are elementary to the future sustainability, use and enjoyment of the waterway region and provide for their protection;
- Integrate and support the development of activities such as biking, hiking, swimming, picnicking and visiting cultural institutions as part of the recreational supply; and,
- Provide a framework for action and investment within which communities plan and senior levels of government can support their efforts.

RECOMMENDATION 13

Provide for long-term public access and the protection of important natural, cultural, economic and social values associated with the Heritage Region’s lakes and rivers by updating and modernizing the 1971 “Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow” plan through the collaboration of federal and provincial governments, municipalities, First Nations and the Heritage Region Council.

²⁸ Canada-Ontario Rideau Trent Severn: CORTS. Study Committee. 1971. *The Rideau-Trent Severn: Yesterday Today Tomorrow: A Report on Optimum Recreational Development*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Supporting Improvement of Community Infrastructure

We believe that residents – both seasonal and permanent – are key to the waterway's economic future. Our economic study reveals much about their impact.³⁰ The results of that study challenged traditional perceptions, including our own.

Contrary to common understanding, boating and traditional tourism are not the most important economic drivers on the waterway. Waterfront homeowners and cottagers have the biggest economic influence, and by a large margin. The almost 50,000 residences along the waterway and 16,500 more on the Haliburton reservoir lakes generate from \$650 million to \$900 million each year in economic activity and contribute close to \$300 million in municipal property taxes. Tens of millions of dollars are paid in provincial and federal sales and other taxes.

The waterway economy is now largely based on its lifestyle amenity value to those choosing to live on it. These residents are rooted in their communities and form strong social and economic ties within them. They offer a more sustained economic base on which waterway communities can grow.

We only need to look to other waterways to see how communities are investing in this new future. In the UK and along the Erie Canal in New York, public, private and non-profit sectors are working together to bring people to the water – to live, work, shop, eat, celebrate, be entertained. Their efforts to create great public waterfront spaces have attracted new residents, businesses, visitors, and have stimulated private investment.

They have integrated public spaces and public art with commercial activities, residential development, commercial accommodation and cultural institutions. The mills and factories that were part of the character of their waterfronts are no longer being torn down but rather converted to contemporary use giving new life to their historic character. They are, in fact, regenerating communities.

Coordinated, strategic approaches are creating sustainable economic and quality of life benefits for these communities. Because of that, these communities are also becoming great tourist venues. Our meeting with the New York State Canal Corporation left us with an indelible impression of the catalyst that strategic community-based investments can be.

We found that waterway communities within our region are already enhancing their waterfronts in different ways. Some, like Cambellford, Hastings, and Bobcaygeon are building additional docking and marina facilities. Haliburton, Harwood and Lindsay are upgrading the ambient quality of their waterfronts to serve both boaters and land-based visitors. Minden is developing the shoreline of the Gull River as an attractive park. Still others, like Trenton, see a future in the development of large-scale attractions designed to attract tourists from passing traffic on Highway 401.

To this point, waterfront enhancement projects within our region have largely been local visions, not part of a broader strategy. Although we are committed to the idea of local vision, we also see great merit in encouraging a broader vision in which individual community efforts can contribute to a larger whole.

³⁰ TCI Management Consultants & EDP Consulting. 2007. *Study of its Sustainable Economic Contributions to Communities Along the Waterway.*

Communities along the waterway indicated that they are interested in investing in projects and programs that advance the goals of the waterway, but they require assistance. We suggest the establishment of a “Trent-Severn Heritage Region Strategic Investment Fund” created with annual waterway-dedicated allocations from federal and provincial funds such as FedNor’s Community Futures program, the Canada-Ontario Municipal Rural Investment Fund, and the province’s rural economic development programs. The establishment of such a fund would promote investments within the context of broad waterway goals and offer a secure, sustainable funding source to support planning efforts by waterway communities.

Finally, communities need to be able to access technical support in planning and design. Support of this kind has paid great dividends elsewhere. It should be part of the overall strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 14

Encourage communities to invest in projects that make the most of the advantages they enjoy from their location on the water by:

- (a) Establishing a federal/provincial Trent-Severn Heritage Region Strategic Investment Fund; and,**
- (b) Funding the Heritage Region Council to enable communities to access planning and design expertise for projects that contribute to broad waterway goals.**