

Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail

LOOKING BACK ON 15 YEARS

Kate Harries

It's been 15 years since the Waterfront Regeneration Trust was established to implement the recommendations of David Crombie's Royal Commission on the future of the Toronto Waterfront.

The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail opened three years later, in 1995, spanning 350 kilometres between Niagara-on-the-Lake and Trenton. Continuous efforts since then have boosted it to 650 kilometres (740 kilometres with designated loops), stretching the entire length of the Canadian shores of the lake and up the St. Lawrence River to the Quebec border.

The trail runs through 41 municipalities, a journey that's exceptional in its diversity, because of the different way each community interprets its waterfront. Within easy driving distance for over six million people – 59 percent of Ontario's population, and 22 percent of Canada's – it has become an established feature of the provincial landscape.

Regard for Ecology and Economy

Policy makers owe a lot to Crombie's view that ecological and economic renewal could support each



When you have Lake Ontario at your side, what could make for a more perfect ride? Cyclists in Ajax travel a naturalized trail. Photo: Simon Wilson

other, says Ontario Tourism Minister Jim Bradley. "I've always thought of it as a precursor to the Green Belt that now stretches for 325 kilometres around the Greater Golden Horseshoe. It's been wonderful for the province – and it's been great for tourism." Green tourism is a growth area, and a feature like the waterfront trail can attract visitors from near and

far – London, Ontario and London, England alike.

Whether they're energetic seniors in Tilley hats or skinny cyclists in Spandex, people who arrive under their own steam have dollars to spend. They'll be staying at bed-and-breakfasts, hotels or campgrounds, they'll patronize restaurants and grocery stores, and they'll go souvenir hunting in boutiques and specialty stores.

And, if they like the place they're passing through, chances are they'll be back for further exploration. Trail



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tourism is booming, as some statistics gleaned from the Waterfront Regeneration Trust website show:

- ▶ three quarters of respondents to the 2002 Waterfront Trail Survey said they would like to spend some or all of their vacation on the trail; among cyclists, the figure was 85 percent;
- ▶ a 2004 study for Trans Canada Trail Ontario projected that the trail generates about \$152 million a year in tourist spending;
- ▶ spending by cycling tourists in Niagara Region totalled \$164 million in 2002, or 12 percent of total tourism expenditures, according to a commissioned study.
- ▶ cycling tourists represented 12 percent of visitors to South Grenville in 2005, a study for that municipality found. They spent \$7.2 million, seven percent of tourism spending.

priority, says Toronto Mayor David Miller, who knows from his own neighbourhood what a difference the Humber River Bridge made when it linked the trail from Etobicoke to Toronto. “The area’s packed now, it really works.”

Miller says he’s working with the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority on the 22-kilometre Scarborough gap, the waterfront trail’s longest disconnect. Phase one of the Port Union linear park that opened last fall is a first step, and another phase is to be completed by 2008. “Phase three is really to find a way around the Bluffs. I’m told that we’re going to explore options over the Bluffs, as well as around them,” Miller says. “The work’s underway. And we will find a way.”

Ajax-Pickering MP Mark Holland

ing, but municipalities need to have a broader vision. In Durham Region, for instance, “instead of developing a plan for all eight municipalities, develop one joint plan and submit that to the government – that’s much easier for me to fight for than eight separate plans that are competing against each other.”

It’s a good idea, says Wayne Arthur, MPP for Pickering-Ajax-Uxbridge. He’d also like to see upper-tier municipal governments play more of a role and notes that municipal politicians now have a four-year mandate, and should start to put their heads together early. The approach echoes that taken by Crombie 15 years ago. His commission was supposed to look at the state of the Toronto waterfront, but he soon decided that the problem required an ecosystem-based solution.

More recently, the Waterfront Re-

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Filling in the Gaps

The waterfront trail has several unique things going for it: it’s next to Niagara Falls, one of the world’s great natural features; and it passes through significant wilderness, picturesque farmland, major tourist attractions and some of the country’s largest cities. But, it has one major shortcoming: it still doesn’t provide a continuous route.

From end to end, 30 percent runs on dedicated off-road trails, 30 percent on residential and rural roads, and 40 percent on highways. Of the highway sections, 100 kilometres, or 15 percent, are stretches with narrow or no shoulders, while another 70 kilometres are classified as gaps, with no safe way through that can be designated and signed.

Making the last connections is high

is quick to emphasize that much remains to be done before the Crombie vision is realized. “I think it’s been ignored,” he says. “I think it’s been underfunded. In fairness to municipalities that are cash-trapped for even basic infrastructure, it clearly is going to require other orders of government to make a commitment to fulfill that vision.”

A former municipal councillor and chair of the Pickering waterfront coordinating committee, he views the waterfront as having immense potential both as a centre for community activity and a focus of ecological health, particularly when regeneration deals with problems like stormwater management.

Holland says he’d be prepared to push for provincial and federal fund-

generation Trust obtained \$9.2 million in funding for 50 waterfront projects through the Canada Ontario Infrastructure Program by combining the applications from 26 municipalities (leveraging over \$22 million in local funding) “That made it a very unique application,” recalls David Lindsay, who was in charge of SuperBuild, the Ontario component of the program at the time the application was filed.

Emphasis on Working Together

It’s the kind of cooperative approach that’s been the hallmark of the waterfront trail since the beginning, says Crombie, a former Toronto mayor and federal cabinet minister, founding member of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust and president of

the Canadian Urban Institute. When the trust was set up in 1992, senior provincial bureaucrats planned for it to have expropriation powers to push the trail through. Crombie says they were quite taken aback when he and his team declined, foreseeing raised hackles at the municipal level. "Our own judgment was that land-use planning is a local responsibility, and if you show up and you've got expropriation powers, they will find ways to delay you for ever," he says. In-

stead, the trust provided an impetus, a boost to plans already in gear, and help in finding funding.

"Good things take a long time," Crombie says. "It would have been even longer if we had done it by central authority." Instead, the trail has been built on learning, seizing opportunities and coming together. "I know people regard that as a warm cliché, but you make better progress that way."

That's certainly a view shared by

Steve Parrish, mayor of Ajax, where the final element in a waterfront right of way across the whole municipality was put in place last year (2006). "We've always managed to get consensus," he says, adding that the city's first official plan provided for a publicly-owned strip along the waterfront. "We're very proud of that – that a goal that was 50 years in the making ended up being accomplished." MW

as published in

Municipal World



CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE – SINCE 1891

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