

Lake Ontario's Waterfront: Realizing a decade of regeneration

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Introduction

In November 2000, ten years after the publication of the groundbreaking report *Watershed* by the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, its successor – the Waterfront Regeneration Trust – published a retrospective on the achievements and lessons of the past decade. This paper summarizes the key findings and looks ahead to the challenges of the current decade.

Watershed brought a new way of thinking to the Greater Toronto Area at the beginning of the 1990s. In this report, Commissioner David Crombie introduced the concepts of bioregion and ecosystem approach, challenged old ways of planning and managing city regions, and showed how our economic, community and environmental health are inextricably linked.

The philosophy and methods espoused in *Watershed* have been incorporated into many plans, projects and policies along the Lake Ontario waterfront and elsewhere.

For example, the 32 communities along the Canadian shore of Lake Ontario now share a vision of a regenerated and connected waterfront, expressed in the Lake Ontario Greenway Strategy published in 1995. Over 100 projects along the waterfront greenway – ranging from parks to housing, restaurants, beaches, wetlands, historic buildings, and marinas – have demonstrated the power of partnerships and the benefits of integrating economic revitalization, community renewal and environmental regeneration in the context of a strong vision and good planning. New developments increasingly show a commitment to design excel-

lence, public access, and respect for waterfront heritage.

The Waterfront Trail has been embraced as a symbol of regeneration and a valuable asset in each community. Some 350 km of Waterfront Trail are in place, with a strong commitment to complete the full 650 km from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Gananoque.

What have we learned?

Through a series of community workshops, surveys and interviews, the Trust identified nine essential ingredients for successful waterfront regeneration. They are:

- make the waterfront a community priority;
- look beyond your boundaries;
- set the stage with good planning;
- use milestone projects to build momentum;
- design with heritage in mind;
- add value with connections;
- make it happen with creative partnerships;
- secure strategic public investment; and,
- attract private resources.

Regeneration in action

A selection of case studies from *A Decade of Regeneration* is summarized below to illustrate these themes. The case studies also show how waterfront revitalization contributes to the most recent trend in growth management and urban development in southern Ontario – smart growth. The Greenway provides a framework for urban restoration and redevelopment that respects and restores natural and cultural heritage, improves quality of life and encourages economic development that is compatible with local needs and resources. The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail expands transportation choices by providing a safe, attractive cycling route for commuting. In addition, with a potential domestic market in excess of 4.2 million people, the Trail and Greenway also represent an important resource for local tourism development.

● Port Dalhousie in St. Catharines illustrates what can be achieved with a shared vision and partnerships among local businesses, homeowners, service clubs and municipal governments. Recent initiatives include a waterfront promenade, new shops and restaurants, an on-road bicycle lane, and a renewed beachfront park, all in the context of a designated heritage district.

● In Burlington, the renovation and expansion of parklands, coupled with the development of the Waterfront Trail, have contributed to a boom in local restaurants and residential units on the downtown waterfront—an excellent demonstration of the value of public investments in quality of life as a stimulus for private-sector investment.



Fig. 1: Humber Bridge. (Source: Gera Dillon for the City of Toronto).

- The pedestrian and cycle bridge over the Humber River (fig. 1) in Toronto is an inspiring milestone in the greenway movement, illustrating the integration of waterfront access with sustainable transportation, magnificent design, and the interpretation of cultural and natural history.

- An integrated shoreline management plan was prepared for the former Scarborough waterfront by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority with assistance from the Trust and other partners. It is the first of a new generation of ecosystem-based shoreline plans integrating physical, biological and cultural factors, as well as a range of needs including public use, natural heritage, public and property safety, and shoreline regeneration.

- Pickering's Mayor Wayne Arthurs established a citizen-led task force to develop a strategy for the waterfront. Early in the process, task force members visited a number of other Lake Ontario communities to gain inspiration and benefit from the experience of others. Recent projects demonstrate the close collaboration between the municipal government and the community, ranging from Home Place – a series of wood sculptures by artist Dorsey James – to the Millennium Square and Trail.

- Strong leadership from the Town of Ajax Council and staff in collaboration with Tribute Homes/Runnymede Development Corporation resulted in the protection of Carruthers Creek Marsh as a prerequisite for an environment-first housing development that takes advantage of the natural setting of the waterfront as a key marketing tool.

- In Whitby, Brookfield Homes developed a homeowner stewardship kit for new residents in their development east of the provincially significant Lynde Shores wetland, earning an award from OPPI for outstanding planning in the communications/public outreach category.

- In Clarington, new waterfront nature reserves, trails and parks are providing essential amenities for thousands of people who are moving into new waterfront communities.

- Cobourg's waterfront has experienced a major transformation from a focus on industry and transportation to a creative and highly successful integration of brownfield remediation, new housing, heritage retention, parkland renewal, cultural festivals and recreational boating. The annual three-day waterfront festival now attracts over 80,000 people and generates \$3.6 million in local economic spin-offs.

Looking ahead to the next decade

The progress of the past decade inspires optimism for the future, and provides a rich fund of ideas, information and experience. But *A Decade of Regeneration* also highlights further action that must be taken to ensure a healthy, sustainable future for both human and natural communities of the bioregion.

The challenges are clear:

- population growth in the GTA alone is expected to rise from 5 million today to 6.7 million by 2021;
- land use changes will continue to affect the Lake Ontario waterfront through the conversion of former industrial or transportation lands to new uses such as light industry, commercial or mixed-use developments;
- the development of new housing, either as infill in existing urban areas, or in previously rural areas, will further change the waterfront landscape.

These changes provide opportunities for community economic revitalization and for the restoration of environmentally degraded areas. They also pose challenges in meeting the housing,

transportation and recreation needs of the growing population without destroying the natural resources and heritage values of the waterfront and its watersheds.

A Decade of Regeneration meets these challenges and opportunities with some clear directions for the next decade.

- First, it is crucial to share the vision with a new generation of local leaders. This is happening in many places through collaboration on projects, through changing membership on committees and action groups, and through public involvement in developing waterfront plans. For example, the Trust is hosting a series of workshops in waterfront communities, including Hamilton (Windermere Basin), Toronto, Kingston and Oakville that are bringing together diverse stakeholders to develop local waterfront visions and action plans, based on the lessons learned over the past decade.

- Second, the Waterfront Trail must be completed and enhanced. Although it is substantially complete from Hamilton to Trenton, there are some significant gaps. The Trail is close to 50 percent complete in the Niagara Peninsula and is in the early stages of development in Quinte Country, Prince Edward County and the Greater Kingston area. In addition to providing much needed public access and waterfront recreation, the Trail has proven to be an important symbol of a new attitude to the waterfront and a catalyst for waterfront improvements and tourism development. It is proving its value as the signature project that ties all the others together.

- Third, water quality and watershed stewardship require more attention. In the Great Lakes Areas of Concern around Lake Ontario, remedial action plans (RAPs) have been developed to address serious degradation, and progress is being made towards restoration, often with the leadership of watershed-based action groups. However, many of the watersheds between the RAP areas are vulnerable to similar land use pressures and environmental degradation, but have not had the benefit of the focused attention that accompanies designation as a Great Lakes Area of Concern. As more people are discovering the Lake Ontario waterfront through the Trail and greenway, there is increasing awareness of the environmental degradation that often devalues the waterfront experience. The Trust is currently developing a water campaign that will reach out to the waterfront constituency to encourage behavior change by providing information about pollution prevention, water conservation and stormwater management.

- Fourth, we need innovative new partnerships to continue implementation of waterfront regeneration. The 1990s was a time of transition from significant participation by upper levels of government (federal and provincial) to greater reliance on local communities to finance waterfront projects. While the upper levels of government will continue to be important partners in a variety of ways, the next decade will see a broader range of participation by foundations, corporations, local groups and individuals. For example, in Belleville the business community has raised \$450,000 to complete the trail infrastructure that they see as critical to local economic vitality. In Clarington, the community group Valleys

2000 has raised \$68,000 to create trails and recreational amenities. The Oakville Community Foundation is setting a new course for community foundation activities with its work to develop a heritage trails network that integrates heritage interpretation with healthy recreation opportunities. And the Rotary Club of St. Catharines is working to raise \$340,000 to create the Charles Ansell Gateway Park at the northern end of the Welland Canal.

The Trust continues as communities face up to their waterfronts

The Lake Ontario waterfront was not degraded in one fell swoop; rather, its quality and health declined gradually, one small insult at a time. The past decade has seen a reversal of that slow process of decline. But regeneration will not happen overnight – it will be an ongoing process of gradual renewal, one project at a time.

Until the 1990s, people and communities had tended to turn their back on the Lake Ontario waterfront. Now that they have begun to face the water's edge again, they see the possibilities there, and expectations are rising steadily. Those expectations are not complex – clean water, clean air, no more beach closings, access to the shore, more green spaces, fewer large buildings and excellent design quality. Much progress has been made already, but continuing to realize this vision will require ongoing dedication, enthusiasm, hard work and leadership.

The Trust continues its work with waterfront communities. It has developed a cooperative communications program to promote the Waterfront Trail in collaboration with the municipalities and conservation authorities around the Lake. A coordinated application to the Provincial Superbuild Fund requests participation in the next wave of waterfront investment. Projects include new cultural facilities and natural heritage projects as well as trail-building, reflecting the evolution of the Trail from a significant public recreational amenity to a regional tourism resource.

The past decade has created a new generation of community leaders who understand the potential of waterfront regeneration to increase quality of life, bringing with it economic vigor and healthier communities. Many OPPI members have played an important role in developing this understanding, and no doubt will continue to do so over the next ten years. In time, that may be seen as our greatest collective achievement, and our greatest hope for a better future.

"There is no quick fix for waterfront challenges. The Waterfront Trail will continue to evolve and improve over many years to come. Progress on water quality, wildlife habitats, economic renewal, and community development will often seem frustratingly slow and uneven. But we will make progress. We will learn from the successes, and from the failures, of our own and other communities. We will persist in the face of inertia and ineptitude, and innovate in the face of obstacles. We will leave our children a healthier, more attractive waterfront than the one we inherited. So welcome to tomorrow's waterfront, full of bright promise." (David Crombie, *The Waterfront Trail Guidebook*, 1995).