

Lake Ontario Waterfront: Update since “*A Decade of Regeneration ...*”

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The author is the Director of the Lake Ontario Waterfront program at the Waterfront Regeneration Trust. She is responsible for the identifying innovative programs, projects and partnerships to complete, enhance and promote the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway. With the Trust's partners, she created the Lake Ontario Waterfront Investment Program, which attracted \$23 million of local investment and \$9.2 million from the Canada Ontario Infrastructure Program, to the waterfront. She also spearheaded the Collaborative Communications and Promotion Program for the Waterfront Trail, which pools resources to fund promotional and trail initiatives such as the website, signage, research and surveys, and events.

Introduction

In the six years since the publication of *A Decade of Regeneration*, the Waterfront Regeneration Trust has worked with its community partners to maintain the momentum for waterfront regeneration while undergoing a major organizational evolution.

This change has demanded that the Trust clearly focus its role in facilitating the vision and required its partnership of municipalities, conservation authorities and community groups to function collaboratively.

The result has been highly successful and as we approach the 15th Anniversary of the groundbreaking Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront Report, *Regeneration*, there is much to celebrate.

In this paper, I will outline the corporate changes that the Waterfront Regeneration Trust faced and how it continues to play a significant role leading the waterfront partnership.

From 1992 to 1999, the Trust was an agency of the Ontario's provincial government with a stable annual operating budget, a staff of 20 and a roster of about 20 excellent consultant experts and secondments. The agency began implementing the recommendations issued in *Regeneration*, chief among them the creation of a waterfront trail. As described in Suzanne Barrett's article, the Trail was part of the comprehensive Lake Ontario Greenway Strategy that addressed all aspects of waterfront regeneration including soil remediation, shoreline management, natural and cultural heritage. In 1998, a newly elected provincial government conducted a review of all provincial agencies, boards and commissions and concluded that while the Trust's work was important, it should find new sources of

private funding and should cease to exist as a provincial agency.

In the next year, the Trust would be engaged in an extensive process around winding up the provincial agency and starting up the newly conceived registered charity with the same name and same mandate; i.e. to regenerate the Lake Ontario waterfront by completing, enhancing and promoting the Waterfront Trail, and to facilitate community regeneration projects.

The Trust launched an ambitious program in its inaugural year as a registered charity – it published *A Decade of Regeneration* and confirmed through research and community consultation the local partners' desire to see a strong new organization emerge from the agency – one that would continue to articulate the values of regeneration, attract new partners and coordinate efforts to achieve our common vision for the waterfront.

The new charity inherited a tremendous legacy of credibility, goodwill and ideas, but it would require creativity, ingenuity and focus in order to earn a leadership role with the communities. Some of the early tests would involve maintaining capital investment on the waterfront; creating a consistent identity for the Waterfront Trail; and promoting the Trail to the public.

Keeping investment on the Waterfront

The Trust's first innovation as a charity was a joint-application to the Canada-Ontario Infrastructure Program (COIP) to invest in the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway. COIP is a federal and provincial funding program aimed at investing in sport, tourism recreation infrastructure. The Trust's application, titled "Lake Ontario Waterfront Investment Program," detailed an exciting three-year plan to construct 50 projects along the Waterfront Trail involving 28 principal funding partners who together would invest over \$22 million on the waterfront. Each partner (almost entirely from local or regional government) represented a network of community partners that were raising funds or volunteering expertise to the local projects.

Given the provincial scale of the project, the Lake Ontario Waterfront Investment Program was submitted under the provincial stream of the COIP. It is worth noting that had the Trust not presented the partners with this opportunity, there would not have been any capital investment either locally or from COIP on the waterfront. With the exception of the City of Burlington, no other municipality on the waterfront had submitted a waterfront project in the municipal stream of COIP.

In keeping with the broad definition of "trail and greenway," the Waterfront Trail projects of the COIP program would contribute greatly to the partnership's regeneration goals by creating:

- 125 km of new trail, and regional and local trail connections
- 6 major waterfront promenades
- 2 bridges
- improvements to over 20 waterfront parks
- 5 new cultural facilities
- interpretation of over 20 waterfront habitats
- 4 major brownfield rehabilitation projects
- 6 significant waterfront habitat restoration projects; and
- 3 harbor/marina upgrades.

It took three years for COIP to finalize its review and negotiate the terms of their contribution to the Trust's application. Throughout the wait, local partners demonstrated their commitment to both the work and the partnership. All partners, even those not part of the application, participated in activities to promote the Trail and the application, such as the high profile end to end tour of the Waterfront Trail that showcased the gains and the potential for the waterfront. The tour became the subject of a six-part, full-page feature in Canada's largest daily newspaper, the Toronto Star. The concerted effort on the part of the partnership elevated the profile of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Investment Program and played a critical role in bringing senior levels of government to the negotiating table.

The COIP application demonstrated to the Trust and its partners that working together through this new partnership could achieve significant results.

Becoming market-focused – Creating a consistent identity for the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway

Where once the Trust and its partners focused exclusively on design and planning concepts, and trail-building, it was becoming clear that more attention was needed in developing a deeper understanding of how to market the Waterfront Trail and Greenway to the public. If successful, the marketing plan would build public support for continued public and private investment on the waterfront. Furthermore, by bringing people back to the waterfront, they would see the potential for regeneration and begin to exercise their influence in shaping policy and planning decisions consistent with regeneration.

Drawing on the talent of local marketing experts, a marketing plan was created that recommended a broad range of activities. This plan informed the Trust's Collaborative Communications and Promotion Program. Under this project, the partnership pooled promotional resources and funding to establish a strong, consistent identity for the Waterfront Trail and to publicize the Trail. The program has resulted in a number of projects, for example Surveys; the website redesign; a series of helpful resources for the public; trail tours to raise media profile; and an extensive signage program for the Trail.

To gain a better understanding of how people view and use the Waterfront Trail, the Trust conducted a *Trail User's Survey* in 2002, which is available in full-text from the www.waterfront-trail.org. The results demonstrated that user support for a continuous trail was overwhelming (95 percent) and that physical fitness and appreciating nature were the top two reasons that people used the Waterfront Trail. In addition, 88 percent of respondents highly rated the Trail's overall design. The Trail is a popular family destination, and receives consistently high ratings for the quality of its views, the environment it runs through, and for its maintenance, cleanliness, and safety.

The survey also confirmed the emergence of the Waterfront Trail as a tourism or holiday attraction. Seventy-seven percent of respondents indicated that they would consider spending part or all of their vacation exploring other areas of the Waterfront Trail. Among the cyclists surveyed, the number

jumps to 85 percent. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Travel Industry Association of America, which reported that 27 million North American travelers have taken a cycling vacation. Cycling has become the third most popular outdoor vacation with North Americans after camping and hiking.

Where there is a strong interest – there is a market. A study commissioned by Velo Quebec documented the impressive economic impact of La Route Verte – a 4,300 km provincial system of cycling routes in the Province of Quebec. In 2000, cycling contributed a total of \$95.4 million CAD (US\$64.6 million) to the provincial economy. This represented 2,000 jobs (person years) and revenues of \$15.1 million for the Government of Québec (US\$10.2 million) and \$11.9 million (US\$8.1 million) for the Government of Canada.

One of the key recommendations from the Marketing Plan was to redesign the Trust's website to better serve trail users. Informed by the User Survey and other studies, the Trust overhauled its website to create a quality resource that now describes the Trail's unique 650 km visitor experience and provides people with the excellent information and tools to plan their own trips. The new site is attractive, easy to use and features over 90 detailed color maps of the Waterfront Trail, along with suggested itineraries and community profiles and hundreds of relevant links. Each profile identifies where to stay, what to see and other valuable tourism resources for visitors. The website also contains the e-library for all of the major publications of the predecessor organizations – the Royal Commission and the Provincial Agency.

Brochures and advertising material that positioned the Trail as an ideal mini-vacation and promoted the website were created and used by our partners to promote the Trail and Greenway in the community, recreation and tourism publication. The advertisements and brochures reinforce the existence and scope of the Trail to the communities who live by it.

One of the Trail's strongest appeals – the sheer length of it from Niagara-on-the-Lake to the Quebec border can also be a barrier to people just learning about it. For many, the notion of an end-to-end trip is daunting and trying to figure out where and how to access the Trail may be too difficult. To respond to this challenge and to encourage active, healthy living, the Trust created the Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway Starter's Kit. Launched at the Toronto Bike Show in 2006 with support from the Ontario Ministry of Health Promotion, the Kit is geared to families and focuses on sections of the Waterfront Trail that run on dedicated paths, have lots to see and do and are within a two-hour drive of Toronto. Each kit contains five mini-guides and detailed maps to a variety of trail experiences.

Trail itineraries featured on website and in printed material are based on tours organized by the Trust in collaborating with local partners. The practice began with the end-to-end tour in 2002, when the Trust invited a reporter from Canada's leading daily newspaper to travel the length of the Trail. The media coverage of that tour raised the Trail's profile to a new height and drove website visits to a record high. As a result, the Trust has instituted an annual tour in its work; each year featuring new sections or regional trail loops. The tours have also become a way to expand the partnership into Quebec with Velo Quebec and into the United States with Seaway Trail, which runs along the American shore of Lake Ontario.

A top-priority for the Trust is the installation of clear signage to mark the route and alert users to any gaps in the Trail. By 2007, over 60 trailhead signs will be installed at major access points on the waterfront. Highlighting inter-municipal connections, the signs depict a detail map of the regional route with parking, washrooms, hazards, landmarks and mileage markers. They are a key information resource for users on site and the artwork corresponds to the maps posted on the website.

Directional markers will complement the trailhead signage program and make it possible for someone to start in Niagara and follow the trail to the Quebec border.

Volunteers working with the Trust are performing an audit this spring to identify signage deficiencies. The results and recommendations will be provided to municipal partners to guide their efforts in achieving a fully signed route by 2007.

The Regeneration continues ...

The Waterfront Regeneration Trust is approaching a major milestone in 2007. Over 50 regeneration projects will be complete on the Trail, adding exciting enhancements to the waterfront. The extension of the Trail to the Quebec border will be accomplished, making the Trail a full 650 km from tip to tip along the Canadian Shores of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. At the Quebec border, a connection has now been developed to that province's 4,300 km system of cycling routes.

Without strong leaders among our partners, coordinating efforts along 650 km of waterfront would be impossible. Organizations such as the Cornwall and Seaway Valley Tourism Association recognize the benefits of connecting to the Trail and are providing valuable coordination at the regional level for our new partners east of the City of Brockville. Volunteer organizations, such as the Eastern Lake Ontario St. Lawrence River Waterfront Working Group and the Regional Niagara Bicycling Committee, have championed the Trail locally and paved the way for the Trail expansion into their communities. Corporations, such as the CIBC and The Trillium Foundation and MapArt, have provided generous funding, expertise and in-kind contributions. This year marks the 10th Anniversary of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce's generous commitment to the Trail. During that time, they will have contributed \$1.5 million to the Trust's work on the Trail and Greenway.

There remain 17 gaps in the Waterfront Trail that require the attention of all levels of government. There are reasons why these gaps are the last to be closed – generally speaking they represent major physical and financial challenges. However, they frustrate people's access to the waterfront, their enjoyment of the Trail and, in a few cases, pose safety hazards for people. The Trust will work with communities to develop a strategy to deal with the gaps and implement a plan to leverage federal and provincial investment to close them. The success of the Lake Ontario Waterfront Investment Program provides an excellent model for this work.

To keep the partnership active and inspired, the Trust will have to continue to seek fresh members to bring new perspective to the Trail. Our activities were focused on trail-building. However, we can see a growing need to develop resources aimed at promotions and marketing. At the same time, if the Trail is to live up to its reputation as a showcase of design innovation and excellence, the Trust will need to stay informed of new approaches and concepts and bring these to the partnership. Work on the Trail will continue to be opportunity-driven, but seizing those opportunities demands a strong, active partnership.

Perhaps the greatest success of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust and its successor organization, the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, is best measured in the ongoing commitment and enthusiasm of our partners and the community's adoption of and leadership in the implementation of the vision for a regenerated waterfront. The long-term goal is ambitious – a trail set in a greenway as close to the water's edge as is environmentally feasible. At this time, 30 percent of the trail runs on dedicated paths; the remaining 70 percent is routed on attractive residential streets, quiet

country roads and scenic highways. The Waterfront Trail and Greenway is a legacy project that will draw inspiration from the community's aspirations for a regenerated waterfront. It is a collective accomplishment of a unique and dedicated partnership inspired by common vision and for a highly valued national natural asset – the Lake Ontario Waterfront.

Together, the Trust and its partners have attracted major public and private investment to making improvements to the waterfront. We have succeeded in building a stronger public awareness of the Trail in the public's mind. Waterfront projects currently underway and recently completed demonstrate the progress we are making toward achieving our vision of clean, green, open, affordable, diverse, usable, attractive, accessible and connected waterfront (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: The Lake Ontario Waterfront Trail and Greenway connects over 40 communities along the Canadian shores of Lake Ontario and the Ontario shores of the St. Lawrence River. From tip to tip it is 650 km long and connects to the Province of Quebec's extensive cycling route, La Route Verte and to the Seaway Trail which runs along the American shores of Lake Ontario.

The following photographs show some of the excellent projects that are regenerating the waterfront. Many are part of the Trust's Lake Ontario Waterfront Investment Program.



Fig. 2: The Waterfront Trail now extends 650 km from Niagara to the Quebec border along the Canadian shores of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. (Source: Ken Forgeron, The Regional Municipality of Niagara).



Fig. 3: Hamilton's new waterfront trail along Hamilton's Harbour. (Source: Marlaine Koehler, Waterfront Regeneration Trust).

- **Niagara Region** has added kilometers to its portion of the Waterfront Trail by paving shoulders of roadways. In addition they have completed major sections of the Greater Niagara Circle Route. The first complete regional loop using the Waterfront Trail, it connects Lake Ontario's waterfront to Lake Erie's. Along the way, people will find excellent interpretative panels that describe the region's fascinating shipping heritage. A major new gateway for the Waterfront Trail and Greater Niagara Circle Route is located at Charles Ansell Park. It pays homage to one of the area's local leaders and replaces a derelict, under-used site (fig. 2).

- **City of Hamilton** – For decades the city's waterfront was dominated by the steel industry with only 5 percent of the waterfront accessible to the public. Today the percentage of publicly accessible waterfront has increased to 35 percent with projects such as the one pictured in figure 2 that extended the Trail along Hamilton's Harbour. The beautification of Hamilton's Harbour has also set the stage for new residential development (fig. 3).

- **City of Burlington** – The city has embarked on an ambitious 10-year strategy to create a vibrant and connected downtown and waterfront for residents and visitors. A new interpretative center at the heart of the City's waterfront will be opened in May 2006. Year-round programming and events will ensure Burlington's waterfront becomes a destination offering entertainment, discovery, culture and play (fig. 4).

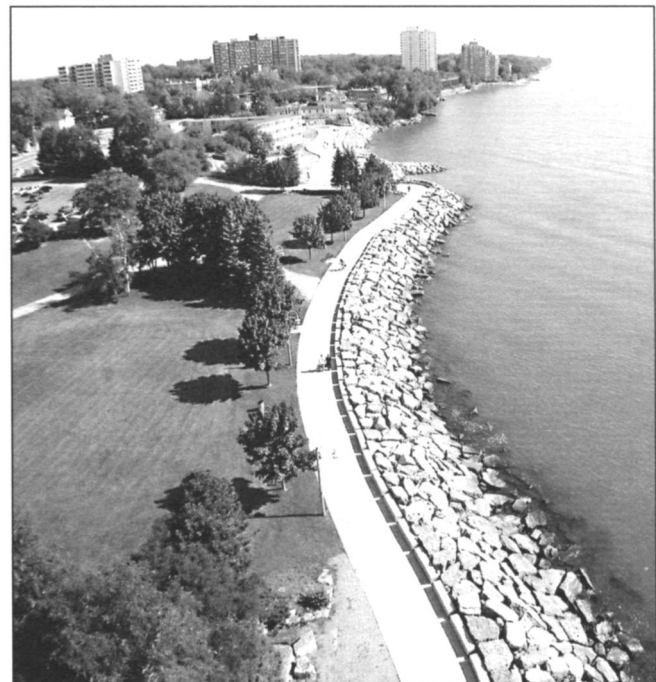


Fig. 4: Tourism Burlington-Blimpics. (Source: Tourism Burlington-Blimpics).



Fig. 5: Port Credit Memorial Mississauga. (Source: City of Mississauga).

- **City of Mississauga** – A major revitalization of the historic village of Port Credit is well under way with the City of Mississauga’s redevelopment of Memorial Park East. By 2007 the City will have completed a major renovation by reconstructing the Credit River’s shoreline protection and adding a water’s edge walkway, installing naturalized planting buffers, viewing platforms, fishing areas, themed gardens, a village pavilion, terrace and playground (fig. 5).

- **Oshawa** – Friends of Second Marsh, a community group committed to protecting and restoring the largest remaining wetland in the Greater Toronto Area, is building a state-of-the-art education facility dedicated to great lakes ecosystem (fig. 6).

- **Port Hope** – Built almost entirely by volunteers in the early 1990s Port Hope’s section of the Waterfront Trail now pays tribute to early trail leaders. The Keith Richan Walkway Bridge (fig. 7) is named after a leading waterfront advocate and trail champion.

- **Cobourg** – The Town has extended its Waterfront Trail west by remediating old industrial sites to make way for parkland. The changes have sparked beautiful new residential development in the area and breathed life into the heritage town center nearby (figs. 8, 9 and 10).



Fig. 6: Second Marsh, Oshawa. (Source: Friends of Second Marsh).



Fig. 7: Keith Richan Walkway, Port Hope – Built almost entirely by volunteers in the early 1990s, Port Hope’s section of the Waterfront Trail now pays tribute to early trail leaders. The Keith Richan Walkway bridge is named after a leading waterfront advocate and trail champion. (Source: Municipality of Port Hope).



Fig. 8: The waterfront of Cobourg – Walktrail Hibernia.



Fig. 9: Newest extension of the Cobourg Trail, Fullerton, along the natural beach. This section of Trail was created on private land with the support of landowners and connects the western communities to the vibrant Cobourg waterfront. (Source: Town of Cobourg).

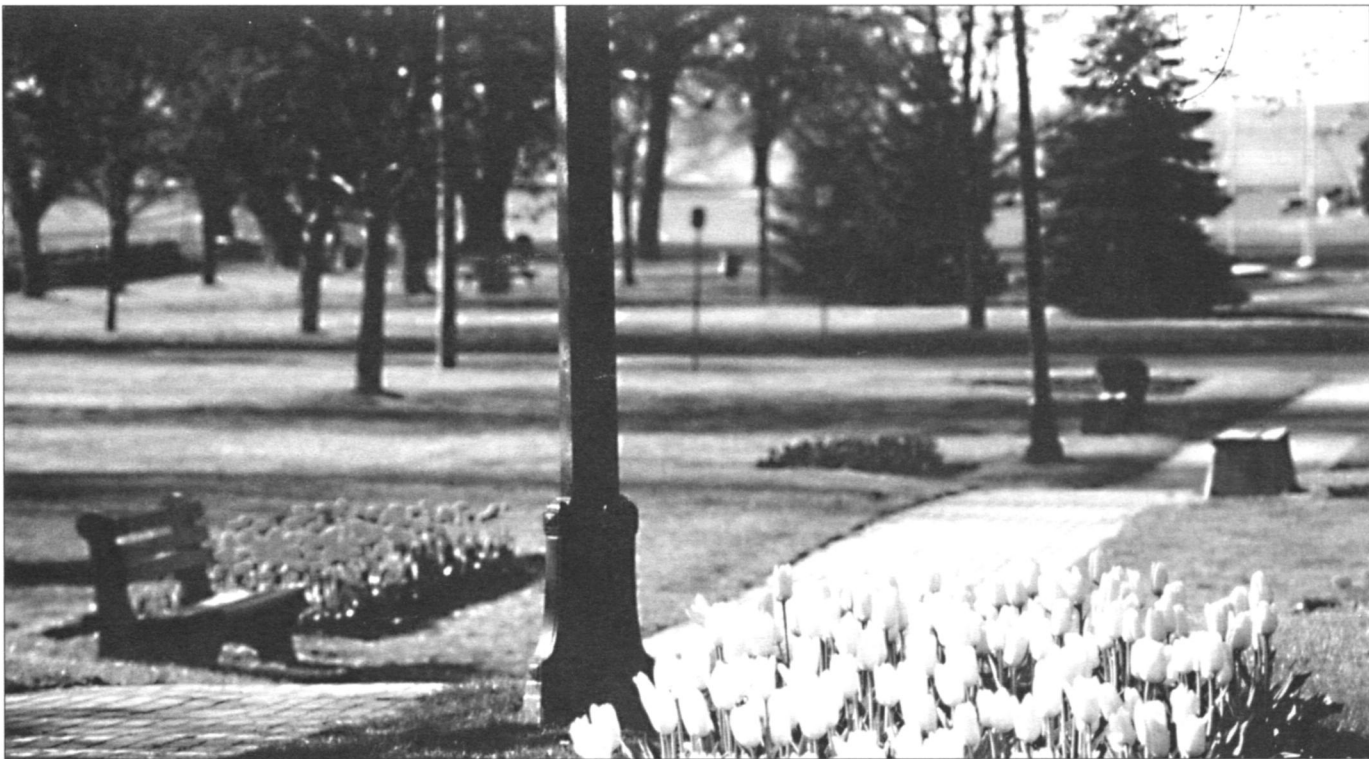


Fig. 10: Flowers, Cobourg.



Fig. 11: Toronto Music Garden. (Source: Marlaïne Koehler, Waterfront Regeneration Trust).

● **Toronto** – The Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation, the agency in charge of developing Toronto’s downtown waterfront, has announced the winner of an international design competition to create a bold new concept for Toronto’s Waterfront. The Waterfront Regeneration Trust participated in the competition as Chair of the Community Stakeholder Committee advising the jury. The winning team was led by Rotterdam’s West 8 Urban Design and Landscape Architec-

ture. Their design is defined by two major moves – creating a continuous water’s edge public promenade the length of the downtown Waterfront and transforming the major road along the waterfront into an iconic boulevard where the “city kisses the lake.” The Toronto Music Garden is an example of a beautiful integration of landscape and culture. It was one of the first major changes to the City’s 40-acre Harbourfront Park system (fig. 11).