

OPINION COLUMN

Democracy lives in Cobourg

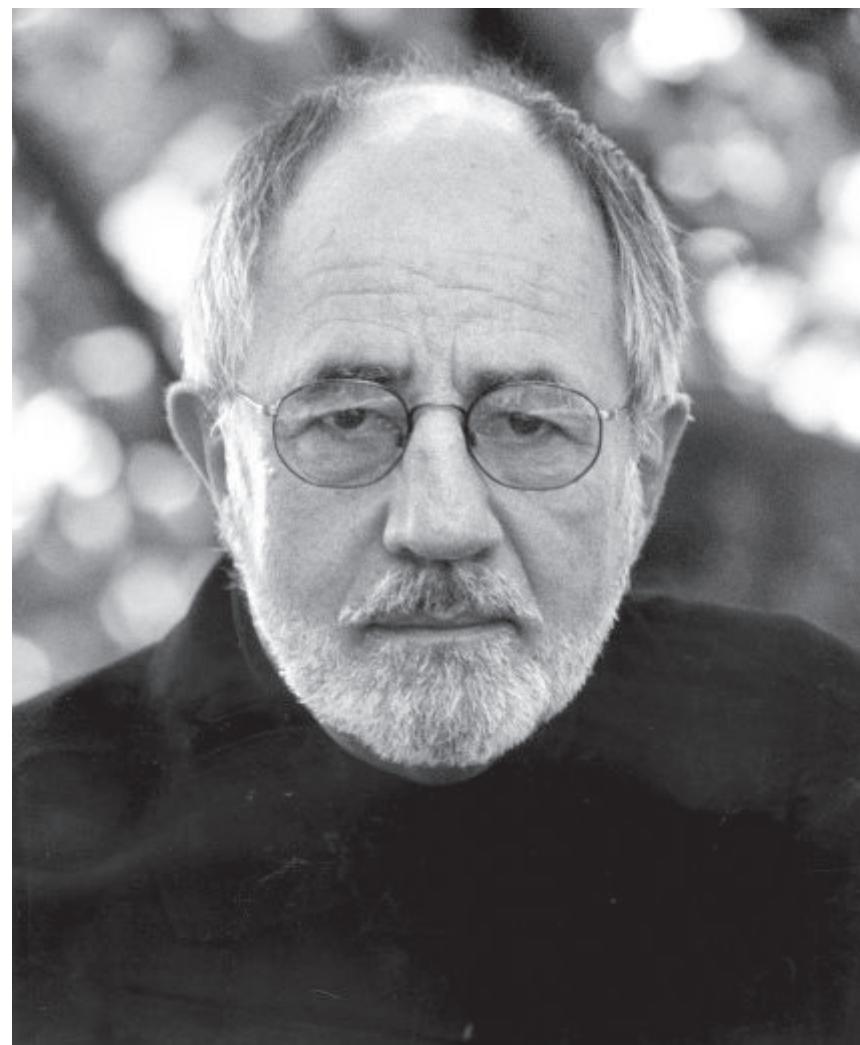
By Grahame Woods, Northumberland TODAY
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Did you feel it? The buzz around Cobourg this past Tuesday morning? From coffee shop to coffee shop the question was asked, "Did you hear?" Cyberspace was jammed with e-mail traffic celebrating the news. But let me take you back to the evening before – one for the ages. A beautiful June evening, a crowd, estimated at around 50, quietly demonstrating, fittingly, in front of Cobourg's Victoria Hall against any expansion of the town's marina. Passing cars sounded their horns in support, gulls circled overhead representing the avian community. A police car was parked ominously to make sure the largely elderly protesters didn't get out of hand.

I say 'fittingly', because if it hadn't been for a similar-minded group of citizens in the 1970s, fighting against those who wanted to tear down Victoria Hall, there would have been no council chamber, filled to the gunwales, to hear debate on Monday's motion to postpone further discussion on the proposed expansion of the marina until 2016. At the end of the evening, having heard several presentations against any expansion, voting on a revised motion by Councillor Brian Darling, Council's Committee of the Whole unanimously decided there would be no further discussion on expanding the western harbour through the installation of additional boat slips.

Yes, democracy lives in Cobourg, thanks to a remarkably dedicated group of citizens coming together to create Preserve Our Heritage Harbour – a group that worked tirelessly to ensure that the proposed expansion didn't destroy a recreational space enjoyed by so many of Cobourg's citizens. Meticulously planned, the group brought together a variety of skills and expertise unlike any seen in Cobourg before, funded by the generosity of Cobourgians anxious to preserve a unique part of the town's heritage.

It appeared to be an uphill battle with what seemed to be an intransigent council intent on carrying through an ill-conceived, unjustifiable plan – despite its members' pre-election assurances it would not happen. Some put this down to the rookies on council feeling their way. Others suggested it was the staff at Victoria Hall imposing its will, much like the PMO in Ottawa controlling its backbenchers. Perhaps the members of council simply didn't



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take the growing opposition to the expansion seriously. Certainly, the motion to put off any further discussion of the expansion plans until Dec. 31, 2016 appeared to be a ploy to silence opposition by attrition.

But Cobourg hadn't seen such a well organized, sophisticated protest group, probably in its history, from its launch at the harbour when close to 150 people turned out, to its fundraising, button and lawn sign/placard creation; its excellent website and Facebook design and, finally, its petitions that garnered well over 700 signatures and counting.

The decision of Cobourg Council restores one's faith in local politics – that its members listened to the electorate that put them there in the first place. Of course, it now prompts the question – what next? It is hoped that Council will consider turning the western harbour into a wildlife preserve. Perhaps even create an advisory committee of citizens to finally plan the refurbishment of the east pier. With a forward-thinking council anything is possible.

In the meantime, let's toast the stalwarts of Preserve Our Heritage Harbour whose determination and dedication changed the political scene in Cobourg – and helped make it a better place to live.

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