

# **A SUBMISSION ON THE PLANNING FOR THE COBOURG WATERFRONT**

**from  
the Willow Beach Field Naturalists**

**August 1994**

We appreciate the opportunity to make this submission on the future development of the Cobourg Waterfront. We regard this review of waterfront planning as particularly important: the decisions that will follow from it will determine the character of our waterfront in future years. As the town continues to grow we can expect this area to become increasingly important, and careful planning is essential to ensure that its quality is not compromised.

Our comments will concentrate on three main areas:

1. As the group most knowledgeable on the town's natural environment, we will outline the importance of the waterfront as a natural area.
2. As major participants in a low-impact, relatively passive recreational activity, we will discuss the importance of such activities to the economic and social well-being of the community.
3. Finally, we will emphasize the importance of developing the waterfront in a manner that will retain as much of this natural value as possible, but also retain the town's heritage character while allowing a mix of uses.

Superficially there would seem to be very little of natural quality to the waterfront between Durham and Green Streets [the east end of Victoria Park]. In fact there can be much of interest year-round. The summer, with much disturbance, is the period of least interest, although some 15-25 species of birds nest along the waterfront and in the immediate downtown area; and the beach strand at the foot of Durham west to the mouth of Cobourg Creek is occupied by the natural plant association typical of the undisturbed Great Lakes shoreline. This is now possibly the finest such beach strand remaining between Presqu'ile and Toronto, and includes at least one plant species [Seaside Spurge] that is regionally rare. Such areas are increasingly scarce.

It is the other seasons when the harbour itself comes into its own, and over the past year 99 bird species have been recorded feeding or resting there, with an additional 21 species of migrants seen flying over. The area is a haven for waterbirds in poor weather, but it also used by migrants for resting and feeding. The most significant locations for these birds, in addition to the open waters of the harbour itself, have been

the tire mat, the beach on the west side of the harbour, and particularly the sections at the north and south ends, as well as the beach strand just west of the landfill. These areas are particularly important because they offer opportunities for feeding and undisturbed resting that are often scarce in our busy harbour area.

The open water appeals to a wide variety of waterfowl, especially in stormy weather. Typically such enclosed waters attract a wider range and different mix of species than the open waters of the lake itself. The tire mat, while untidy in its present condition, is the one place where birds can rest without the fear of human intrusion. There is constant activity there throughout the warmer weather, and the gatherings of birds often include rare species. The west shorelines offer feeding areas for waterfowl and shorebirds on migration, not available in the rest of the harbour, where cement or armoured shoreline mainly affords resting area only for the larger gulls.

Two species, the Canada Geese and Ring-billed Gulls, are of course undesirably numerous in our region as a whole. Unfortunately no matter what is done to the harbour these birds will continue to present problems of fouling. These two even tolerated the noise and disturbance of the recent powerboat races, when all the shyer birds moved out.

Clearly all birds using this area must be prepared to tolerate a fair degree of disturbance, even in winter. The fact that they do so is less a measure of their tameness, than of the fact that suitable areas for waterbirds to rest and feed along the shoreline of the lake are surprisingly limited, and most of them are also subject to disturbance. The birds are forced to adapt to what is available. Migrants in particular are often pushed to their limits by the demands of the migration, and need places they can rest and refuel. Hence we have some obligation to try to accommodate their needs in our planning. Few human waterfront uses are matters of survival!

Fortunately there is a wide range of human activities that are reasonably compatible with such an objective. It at this point that we would like to discuss the importance of passive recreation.

Nature study is itself a form of passive recreation: it makes no demands for facilities or infrastructure, and hence to the suppliers of public recreational services it is almost invisible. But birding alone is one of the most rapidly growing recreational pursuits in North America, and recent studies both here and in the USA have shown it to be of major economic significance. A local example is that two major books are currently

being published, one a birdfinding guide to the Province and the second a naturalist's guide. Both will include references to Cobourg harbour as a place to visit to see birds.

But naturalists are only a tiny percentage of those who use our harbour for passive recreation. Indeed, it probably is much the most important use of the waterfront in terms of the number of persons participating. It occurs at all times of day from dawn to dusk and beyond, and throughout the year. People picnic, walk dogs, jog, stand and talk, feed the gulls, admire the view and just walk or sit.

Like birding, these activities also make few demands for facilities or infrastructure, and hence to the suppliers of public recreational services and others they too tend to be taken for granted, or dismissed. We noted an editorial in *The Cobourg Daily Star* promoting the recent power boat races that suggested they would 'add some life to the waterfront' as though it was dead. We wondered if the editorial writer had ever visited the area on a warm summer weekend! But the mistake was an understandable one; the constant coming and going is informal, unstructured, and hence easily overlooked as important in itself. By the same token, the needs of such users are easy to overlook, as they typically are unorganized.

These uses are eminently compatible with one another, and with the total image of a heritage waterfront. People do not 'phone their councillors to complain about the noise these low-key activities create, or decide to go somewhere else because Cobourg is getting just too disturbed. It is true that the users do not pay admission charges, or come out in crowds for some specific event. But they may, and do, come to Cobourg to live, and so contribute to the vigour of the town in a much more permanent manner.

It would be interesting and probably significant to the planning process if a determination could be made of the reasons people have for living in Cobourg and for moving here. Additionally, a survey of recently located industries [or those considering locating here] would, in our opinion, show that in addition to economic and geographic reasons, a pleasant living environment for employees is an important factor in deciding where to locate a new enterprise.

But Cobourg is growing short of places where people can just relax out of doors. Victoria Park cannot provide everything, and much of it, too, is devoted to more structured modes of recreation. James Cockburn Park, the one larger area currently without extensive facilities, appears destined for further baseball development, and in any event is not on the waterfront. Evidence of this shortage can be seen in the current strong opposition to the proposals for the CN property between Division and Third

Streets. We strongly support any effort to retain this area as open space, as it makes an important contribution to the character of the downtown waterfront. On any pleasant day at present it being used for passive recreation, and on warm summer weekends it becomes populous.

Even if the town is able to acquire this property as open space, however, this will effectively only perpetuate its present uses, not add to our available park space. We can reasonably expect to need more in the future. If, on the other hand, the area is replaced by more buildings, additional people will be added to the downtown core, and they in turn will look for more places to recreate. The proposed acre or so of quite structured public open space proposed in the CN plan is unlikely to provide fully for the open space needs even of those who will locate there, let alone for those currently using the property. Parking considerations can only exacerbate these problems further.

With these ideas in mind, we recommend that the west side of the harbour be developed as passive, semi-natural open space. Under this proposal:

1. The west shoreline of the harbour would be left to continue as natural beach.
2. The areas currently devoted to landfill would be grassed, with judicious planting of native shrubs such as dogwoods to provide windbreaks and eye relief [and incidentally, but importantly, cover for migrant landbirds].
3. The area immediately at the base of Third Street be developed to provide expanded parking.
4. The natural beach strand at the foot of Durham and west to the mouth of Cobourg Creek be retained in its natural condition, possibly with an interpretive plaque explaining its significance. We have no objection to a footpath along here, but it should be sited with sensitivity to minimize destruction to the vegetation, and particularly to avoid damage to rarer plant species.
5. The tire mat be tidied-up but similarly retained in some form, again with an interpretive plaque, explaining the birds that can be seen there and what they are doing.

There is abundant precedent for such passive development. The landfill parks in such places as Toronto Bay [west of the Humber River] are among the nearest, but similar developments or conditions can be seen in Thunder Bay, Sault Ste. Marie or, if smaller communities are desired as examples, from Oakville to Red Rock! All are successful, and indeed Metro Toronto's Humber Bay Park is typically packed on warm weekends, when its inland park areas are relatively empty.

Such development will accommodate our own interests, but it will also enhance the natural environment, and provide an important outlet for passive recreation for everyone. It would produce a park that is likely to be quite different in character from any possible development on the CN property.

There are also administrative advantages to the town. Current waterfront park areas are quite manicured, and correspondingly demanding in upkeep. A more natural, grass-and-shrubs park area would be a relatively low-cost option both to develop and to maintain. It would form a pleasant, low-key complement to the existing developments, yet be sufficiently separated from them that it would not be out-of-character.

We believe that this proposal is the best balanced approach to the development of the remaining waterfront areas. A host of potential users compete for this space, and the Harbour Area Secondary Plan proposes ambitious development schemes. But the lake and lakeshore is not a limitless resource, and Cobourg really has little flexibility left to expand recreational facilities here. The recent jet-ski and power boat race issues have well demonstrated that some uses have the potential for both disruption and controversy, but allowing any one set of uses to dominate to the exclusion of others now seems inappropriate. A harbour filled with boat ramps not only destroys the remaining natural values of the area, but it also destroys the open quality which makes the present harbour area so attractive. The value of the more passive development is that it will allow a wide variety of uses, and hence satisfy the needs of a wide range of users, without conflict with others. We urge its adoption.

We offer our cooperation and assistance in the planning, implementation and future on-going phases including [but not limited to] the following:

1. assistance in wildlife and vegetation cataloguing and habitat evaluation,
2. possible funding of interpretive plaques,
3. leading outings to help the public understand and enjoy the natural heritage features of the area.

Bill-

7/13/94

This is the waterfront thing I mentioned earlier. I was just going to put some notes down, but it was almost as easy to do it this way, and it will give people something to react to.

I guess this waterfront committee doesn't even exist yet, but based on past experience it will probably be formed and then suddenly invite input. At that point it takes a while for a club to decide to make a submission, and then someone has to write it. This could give us a head start.

I'm not married to any of it, as I'm used to rewriting briefs, and I'm also used to seeing groups decide that they don't want to go that way at all! So use it or not as you see fit, or modify it as desired - I don't mind. I just didn't want to pass up an opportunity! [Although if the Club doesn't want it let me know, and I may revamp it into a personal submission if appropriate.]

I hope the west trip goes well.

Clive