

# COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED OPTIONS FOR THE COBOURG WEST HARBOUR AREA

by

the Willow Beach Field Naturalists

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We appreciate the opportunity to examine the proposals for development in the west harbour area. There are a number of common themes to the three concepts offered, and we will discuss these first.

## 1. The West Beach.

We applaud the retention of the west beach in its natural state. As noted in our initial submission, this is a beach strand typical of the undisturbed Great Lakes shorelines. Such areas are environmentally sensitive and increasingly rare, and this one is the finest remaining between Presqu'ile and Toronto.

We have now additional evidence as to its importance as a provincial Environmentally Sensitive Area, and there are some features here that are not found at Presqu'ile. (Note that, in addition to the regionally rare Seaside Spurge, the *Potentilla paradoxa* included in the plant list supplied to the consultants is provincially rare, and confined to the Great Lakes shorelines; and the strand contains one of the best stands of Sea Rocket along the lower Great Lakes).

We understand that there have been some requests to 'clean-up' the area, particularly from persons in Legion Village. We support this insofar as that section abutting the Village is concerned. This area is covered in landfill, and their request is very understandable. Cleanup of the natural beach itself should be confined to trash removal (which is needed), and development confined to carefully sited walkways.

## 2. Expansion of the marina area.

The extent of the marina expansion is extremely distressing. We understand that the study's terms of reference were to maximize the area devoted to boating, and given this myopic direction the proposals possibly make the best of a poor situation. But boating is not the only recreational activity the harbour provides, and it remains that expansion of this scope conflicts unnecessarily with other pursuits, and with the aesthetic quality of the harbour. It will virtually eliminate the

present habitat for diving ducks, which is heavily used by these and other waterfowl.

We submit that there is no evidence of a demand on the scale that justifies filling of the harbour west of the centre pier with slips. Extending the slip areas to the east, and adding some slips along the west side of the centre pier seem in harmony with present and possible needs in the near future. This will take away from waterfowl habitat but not eliminate it, and perhaps represents a fair compromise.

The potential loss of this important area is the most serious weakness in the proposals. It is of major concern to us, and we hope it does not reflect a general lack of understanding among Cobourg decision-makers of the positive advantages to the town of wildlife habitat. For this reason we will expand further in the appendix below on the significance of the harbour to naturalists, and on the economic impact of naturalists.

### 3. The road along the West Headland.

The proposed road to the tip of the west headland seems a regressive concept. We appreciate that the area is large, but given the number of things it is being asked to do - boat storage and removal, boat and windsurfing launching, picnic area, car parks, passive recreation, lake viewing, natural area and fish spawning habitat - there is a real danger that some of them will not work. Our experience has been that, in such cases, the attempts to provide for passive recreation and (particularly) natural areas are the ones that fail!

The best of the present concepts places wildlife area, pedestrian walkways and the access road and parking lot all together at the tip. There is undoubtedly a demand for passive recreation there, as witness the many walkers who already venture out on to the existing landfill, extremely rough, muddy, and bur-ridden though it is. There are relatively few places in Cobourg that are publicly accessible where one can walk in natural surroundings, as the recent controversy over James Cockburn Park attests. An adjacent road would destroy the tranquillity and sense of isolation that this walk provides at present. The increased disturbance from constant automobile traffic will inevitably result in too much disruption to the wildlife area to make it more than a token patch of wetland habitat.

A relevant example that might be familiar to the consultants is the case of Humber Bay Parks east and west in the west end of Metropolitan Toronto. The west section is devoted to boating and to a road that runs along the entire outer edge, servicing a series of small parking lots, very similar to that proposed here. These are often filled, but the heaviest use by the general public is on the east section, where footpaths radiate from a large central parking lot. This park is an extremely busy area, with persons walking, picnicing, fishing, bird watching, and just sitting on the grass. The wildlife area here, while under pressure, works.

We're sympathetic to those who like to sit in their cars and watch the water (we do too), but this activity is already occurring constantly on the east pier, and from the existing parking lots. In fact, Cobourg is blessed with an unusual number of vantage points from which the lake can be viewed from one's car, and thoughtful siting of the new lots at the base of the headland should expand the area available. But it is unrealistic to think that the extensive viewing that the CN lands now provide can somehow be assimilated into this plan, and indeed the public uproar over the loss of the CN property as unstructured public open space has led to the proposals for their development being reviewed.

#### 4. Natural vegetation

We were very pleased to see that natural vegetation is to be developed on the headland, and that extensive manicuring is not being proposed. The use of native plants and shrubs provides food and cover for wildlife (dogwoods are ideal), and is a cost-effective and environmentally friendly approach to managing the area.

We now turn specifically to the three concepts as presented by the consultants on November 17, 1994:

##### Concept 1

The reduced amount of new landfilling involved in this proposal was a plus, but the positioning of the boat storage at the very tip of the landfill is a disaster both aesthetically and in terms of natural values.

##### Concept 2

This proposal, with the access to the seasonal moorings positioned in the centre of the headland, is the worst of the three. It assures maximum disturbance of the only remaining area - the headland itself - with natural potential along the harbour

shoreline, and it makes it very difficult to minimize the impact of the expanded moorings on the existing waterbird habitat.

### Concept 3

This concept is much the best of the three, and seemed to be offered as the preferred one. There were several points specific to it:

1. We are concerned about the amount of new lakefilling that seemed to be envisaged. Broadening the headland eastwards cuts down on the amount of open water, already curtailed by the enormous expansion of the boat moorings.
2. The positioning of the winter boat storage and the parking area servicing boat launching still dominate the headland. It would be most desirable to move the boat storage and associated parking further inland. An area at the foot of Hibernia is probably the best site in terms of sight-lines from Legion Village and the new Victoria Gardens development. It is to one side of the latter, and the end wall of the east block of the Village obstructs viewing from it. This area appears close enough to allow ready access to the water, but sufficiently set-back not to intrude on the quality of the headland.
3. We are excited by the natural area at the tip of the headland. We are also a little apprehensive that developing a viable wetland might be challenging. Wave action along the entire west shoreline of the harbour (i.e. the east shore of the western headland) can be substantial, particularly in an easterly gale. Algal buildup in the later summer and fall is also considerable, particularly at the north and south ends, and our botanical surveys of the past year have failed to yield any true aquatic species along here. With these cautions in mind, the idea is an imaginative and intriguing one.

It appears that an armoured loop is envisaged as an answer to some of these problems. Given that the harbour's birding bonanza, the tire mat, appears headed for extinction, is it possible that the loop could form a chain of small, low islands to which public access is excluded? The present tire mat has an importance quite out of proportion to its size, mainly because it is wholly inaccessible to people even when the rest of the harbour is filled with activity. We see nothing in any of the options that approximates these conditions, and one of the weaknesses in the concept of forming a wetland at the end is that in a busy harbour it is virtually impossible to exclude access to such an area. In its present form the loop would simply become another place to sit and fish, with attendant

disturbance and trampling of the vegetation. We strongly endorse efforts to create new or improve existing aquatic habitat which is protected from human intrusion.

In conclusion, we view the new proposals as a major improvement on the town's earlier, badly marred harbour plan. However, the massive expansion of boat moorings is still retained, and although the effort to deal with it is imaginative and attractive, its impact is too overwhelming on natural values.

It is our strongly-held view that in an understandable but misguided abundance of zeal to create facilities for those who can afford yachts, the proposal does not place sufficient emphasis on the needs of the majority of our citizens and visitors who enjoy the diversity of Cobourg's waterfront and its natural qualities. In short, more emphasis must be placed on preserving and creating natural habitat and quiet areas free from vehicular and boat traffic.

**ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HARBOUR  
AS A NATURAL AREA, AND THE ECONOMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF NATURALISTS**

The harbour's natural significance is as a refuge for migrants, mainly waterbirds, as a staging area for some birds before and during migration, and as a sheltered feeding area along the lake throughout the year. In this its attractiveness parallels its significance as a small boat harbour: good small boat harbours are scarce, and the same goes for sheltered refuges for waterbirds.

The local flocks of tame Mallards and Canada Geese forage in the harbour year-round, also ranging along the waterfront from the creek on the west east to Lucas Point. They forage most consistently along the west harbour shoreline, although they will utilize the inner harbour and boat slips, the only species apart from gulls to do so with any regularity. Our previous submission noted the problems that can be created by the abundance of these birds and the Ring-billed Gulls, but this over-abundance is a product of the broader management of the Great Lakes as a whole (and feeding by people), and is unlikely to be influenced by the decisions we make on the harbour.

From a birder's point of view one plus is that these birds will sometimes attract waterfowl stragglers of other species. Most of the other waterfowl that visit, however, are diving ducks (Group 2B on our previous list). These forage in the open waters west of the centre pier and use the harbour more consistently than the semi-domesticated species.

Typically the harbour never wholly freezes over winter, and five to six species of diving ducks are present throughout. These birds are joined regularly by small numbers of other species, which may remain from a few hours to most of the season. In this period the headland is visited by small flocks of Snow Buntings and other sparrows and finches; and by occasional hawks and Northern Shrikes. Snowy Owls are regular.

Gull numbers vary widely, but the three commoner species (Ring-billed, Herring and Great Black-backed) are usually present, and are joined by rarer wintering species such as Glaucous and Iceland Gulls. These birds use the harbour for resting and shelter in storms, and mass on the ice, open water or boat slips depending on the weather.

Spring and fall brings a wide assortment of waterbirds: small numbers of migrant waterfowl gather in the open waters and dabbling ducks feed along the west beach of the harbour; herons use the breakwaters and west harbour beach; and shorebirds appear on the tire mat and the west beach. Smaller gulls and terns loiter on the tire mat as well, and rarer species often appear there. 40-50 species of birds can be found using the harbour at these times.

Summer is the quietest period, but huge flocks of cormorants will feed in the open waters, and the tire mat continues to be used by small gulls and terns for resting, courtship and feeding young. The other gulls concentrate on the breakwalls.

In sum, you never know what is going to turn up in Cobourg harbour. Quite often birds will be found there that are not at Presqu'île: indeed, sometimes (Nov.15 most recently) a wider variety of waterbirds were present in the harbour than at Presqu'île! Given that this variety is constantly changing both daily and throughout the year, and that the lakeshore is a major flyline for landbirds as well, and the area's attractiveness to a birder is easy to understand.

We have covered this in some detail, because some feed-back we have had to our earlier submission suggested that there was a perception that our concerns were spurious and should be ignored. This is puzzling, as it begs the question as to why we should take the time and trouble to invent objections: perhaps the view is that some persons are against change per se, and naturalists are in that class.

Certainly we too often find ourselves pleading for values that are under threat, and natural open space is not something that traditionally has been highly valued by country towns: there seems to be lots around, so why worry? But the loss of natural habitat is insidious, eroded by the cumulative impact of individually minor decisions. What our advocacy of these issues may obscure is that birding in particular is an avocation with major economic impact. One immediate example comes to mind: two of our members have earned their living for the past 13 years by leading small groups of naturalists to such upscale and exotic locales as Costa Rica and Australia. There are other examples close to home: the net economic value of birding at Point Pelee in 1987 was estimated at \$6 million!

Studies in the U.S. find birders are, on average, middle aged, highly educated, and with incomes above the national average; they spend an average of \$1,852

annually on their hobby, much of it in travel - and they watch birds year-round. There is no reason to suppose that the profile of Canadian birders would be much different. Birding is worth trying to encourage in one's community.

In our earlier submission we differentiated between our interest in retaining natural heritage areas because they are rare and significant to society as a whole, and our interest in nature as a fascinating avocation. The west harbour area illustrates these two threads well. The west beach is an important environmentally sensitive area, but it is not an area of major recreational significance for naturalists.

The harbour, however, is. It has real recreational potential for birders, as there is the chance of finding something different there. For example, our previous submission mentioned 99 species in the past year, and the bird list submitted to the consultants enumerated 142 species seen over three years. Yet in the four months since that list was compiled an additional six species have been seen, including one (Franklin's Gull) that brought visitors from the other side of Toronto looking for it! Obviously the harbour is still not Point Pelee, but for the Toronto-based birder it is only some 30 minutes from Presqu'île, a major provincial birding destination. It's almost as fast to drive to Presqu'île along Highway 2 as along 401, and there are excellent facilities here for meals and accommodation.

It is to Cobourg's advantage to encourage persons who value nature - and birders are just the most identifiable of a whole spectrum of such persons. The cost is not \$1.3 million, but usually no more than trying to protect and enhance what we already have. There is no demand for expensive facilities, but rather a support for maintaining the rural atmosphere that most residents of Cobourg seem to value. The town may wish to close the door on the urban giant just an hour to our west, but the Wal-Marts are already knocking. There's merit to encouraging those who are likely to support different kinds of business in our town, and who will value what Cobourg has to offer.

From the standpoint of attracting tourists, other short-term visitors and future residents it is our view that "Welcome to Cobourg - visit our heritage harbour" would be immeasurably enhanced by being able to add the words "and our natural areas".