

A lesson in Civics - 101

By Grahame Woods, Northumberland Today
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NORTHUMBERLAND - Alright, class, listen up. The assignment today – write a paper exploring civic responsibility in a small-town environment.

Try to imagine a community of around 18,000 souls located, oh, lets say on the shore of Lake Ontario; a town that has a vibrant downtown and an engaged population that enjoys a beautiful harbour and an unspoiled park and waterfront that stretches from boundary to boundary.

And let's say that the council members of this town, elected in good faith by the residents, has this idea to 'do something with our waterfront'. But what? Well, the mayor, earning \$33,000 a year, and council members, on average close to \$17,000, are paid to run the town and make such decisions. But they elect to hire a firm of 'consultants' to come up with a vision for the waterfront that allegedly will cost \$75,000 smackers of taxpayers' money. So, explore the nature of the community and speculate if there are enough residents with sufficient expertise to, instead, volunteer and offer suggestions as to the future of the waterfront.

For the second part, put yourself in the position of the hired consultants, having had the gift-horse \$75,000 dropped in their laps. Consider the position it puts them in. For that amount of money they realize they will have to present something substantive to justify the cost, even though, probably on their first visit to the town, their first instinct is leave the said waterfront as it is. But, hey, it's 75 grand. As well, having to justify the expense of hotel rooms and meals (no doubt enjoying sampling the town's fine restaurants), they will have to look 'busy', walking the length of the town's waterfront, studiously 'observing' and 'discussing'.

Imagine that dialogue and to what lengths their imagination and creativity will go. "Hey, at the very east end, looking out over the lake; all that overgrown, silent space only good for rabbits, foxes, birds nesting, and views of the water? How about we suggest a hotel. A boutique hotel. Has an upscale ring to it. No, even better, a couple of condos. Think of all that tax money coming to the town." Keep in mind these consultants will have to be really creative.

Also, the town has a harbour and marina. Even though the town council had already designated that the western part of the harbour will have no additional boat-slips, thus allowing recreational canoeing, dragon-boating etc, the consultants will no doubt seize on it and suggest additional boat-slips anyway, killing off the small wildlife preserve. To top it off, why not include a restaurant on the existing parking lot. "Let council reject it. Remember, remember the 75,000 big ones, guys."

Finally, imagine off-the-record conversations between members of council as they consider the consultants final report. Having spent the money, how can they reject it? Oh, and the next election is looming. Yes, you with your hand up?

"Amazing. You've just described my hometown of Cobourg and the council that runs it – to a tee. It's obsessed with ruining our waterfront and throwing tax-payers' money down the drain. \$75,000, you say? Shameful. Can I title it, 'If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It'? Even better, 'Throw Da Bums Out!'?"

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