

Waves of change

The waterfront has come a long way from its unfriendly industrial past -- but what of its future?

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Water kisses the pier, a nautical scent in the air, sun glowing brilliantly in a pale blue sky. Just outside Williams Coffee Pub at Pier 8 on the west harbour, tourists pose for photos by a soaring steel sculpture, while at a table a young woman named Faye reads her Bible. She lives near Gage Park.

"I like the open space, being close to the water, feeling the breeze," Faye says. Wind ripples the book's thin pages; she's reading from Genesis.

In the beginning, or at least in the 1980s, you couldn't be down here on the water at the harbour at all.

Never mind drinks on the Williams patio, attractions and rides. Back then signs didn't push the grilled pesto panini; they just pushed: Keep Out; No Admittance To These Premises Unless Authorized in Writing; Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.

These bad old days of the west harbour are fresh in the minds of those with longer memories, but for most that history is fading fast.

Questions loom over where it all goes from here, but the city's waterfront parks have become hot spots where each year one million people -- that's million -- buy mochaccinos and ice cream and tickets for boat rides and trolleys, and honey garlic at Wingfest.

That's just the annual tally from "points of sale," not counting those who flock to the harbour and don't crack their wallets.

Look at the kids playing in Pier 4 Park atop a grounded tugboat, called the Bayport, that in its youth in the 1940s towed warships around Halifax Harbour.

Hear laughter as they dance in the water of the splash pad beside it. Those kids were not present at the creation, not yet born, when it all turned around, 16 years ago.

It all could have gone very much the other way. Hamilton's west harbour could have become the opposite of the now daily carnival on the shore.

And, in fact, that was the way it was heading back in the day, the 1970s and into the early '80s. The word "reclaimed" is often used when it comes to the harbour, as in the people reclaimed the waterfront.

But 30 years ago, the meaning was something entirely different. Back then it meant seizing the natural charms of the waterfront to accommodate industry, control and develop what were called "water lots" -- as though God's aquatic gifts were merely pieces of real estate to buy and sell.

Back then a consulting firm urged the city to "reclaim" a 100-acre site "now under water" along the west harbour all the way up to Desjardins Canal, and landfill it for industry and port development.

It didn't happen, but people were still not welcome at the water for many years; in 1984, just 2 per cent of Hamilton's 45 kilometres of shoreline was open to public access. Today that number has risen to 28 per cent.

Back in the early '80s, a boy visited the harbour with his mother, anxious to see the tall ships that had arrived in the harbour on tour. Temporary fencing went up for the event, spectators were ushered into a small viewing area since most of the waterfront was an industrial wasteland. Spectators loved the ships, but couldn't even get a cup of coffee or soft drink down there.

Still, thousands came, eyes were opening to the possibilities, especially in the wake of urban waterfront refurbishing sprouting in cities around the world.

Some eyes had already been wide open for years, longtime North Ender and waterfront advocate Gil Simmons' among them. The day you could simply enjoy a beer on the waterfront, she once said to applause at a public meeting, will be the day we can declare the harbour is a people place. One day the mayor would call Simmons the "beacon, the beginning" for the waterfront's rebirth.

"I think it's just about people seeing something, and being optimistic," Simmons said in her English lilt, looking back on it all. "And getting a bit aggressive, I suppose."

In 1984 the city bought what was known as the Lax lands, on the west harbour by the railway tracks, for \$2.8 million. It was 40 acres of scrubland that jutted into the lake, created as a landfill by a scrap dealer who had once scrapped the famed Avro Arrow jet fighter project. That land was destined to become Bayfront Park, but first came the massive undertaking to clean it up; the fill had largely come from construction of the Claremont Access, and other waste accumulated over 18 years. It took eight years to excavate and ship out the filth.

It was the summer of 1993, 16 years ago, that Bayfront and Pier 4 parks finally opened in July and August. Bayfront was originally christened Harbourfront but there was a backlash against the name. Sounded much too Toronto. The west harbour beaches opened for swimming, too, the first time since 1939 that it was legal for people to take a dip in the harbour.



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And in 1995, the boy who had once watched the tall ships arrive in the unfriendly old harbour was elected to city council -- at 24, the youngest ever. Chad Collins took up the waterfront as his priority.

"We built this city on industry, and used and abused waterlands to do that," Collins said. "But people recognized the potential, that they could be people places again."

Today, the west harbour still has its boating clubs, but also the waterfront trail, trolley ride, cruises, wide open grassy fields, ice cream parlour, Discovery Centre and HMCS Haida.

The tours, ice cream and bustling Williams Coffee Pub franchise are owned and operated by the Hamilton Waterfront Trust, a registered public charity, and all local profits go back into the trust for waterfront projects. (The Waterfront Trust was formed out of a settlement between the city and the former Hamilton Harbour Commission, which was a federal government agency. The feds provided funding in the form of a trust, with its mandate to protect the waterfront and find ways to connect people with it. The trust has 13 full-time paid staffers (four in administration, most of the rest work at Williams) plus 71 part-time seasonal to work various attractions, and five appointed trustees, one of whom is Collins.)

On any given day, Williams is packed, other attractions bustling. On a random sunny Wednesday, there is not a seat to spare on the spacious coffee pub patio. It's not only Hamiltonians coming to the harbour, either.

"A lot come from the Toronto area," Collins said, "because of the length of the waterfront trail, and how long and wide it is, you can't find public access like that to the lake anywhere in Ontario ... There are very few areas in Hamilton where there is this kind of buzz. The waterfront areas are the most valuable ones we have."

It's all good, unless, perhaps, you are an old captain of industry type who once controlled the place with fences and barbed wire, who believed the waterfront was for business, not people. You imagine him as a white-bearded curmudgeon, visiting the harbour today. (Affect gruff baritone:

"This is a PORT, damn it, not a playground. What about shipping!? Great Caesar's Ghost, now they have a tugboat at Pier 4 and she doesn't even FLOAT! And what in blazes is a latte anyway?)"

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For those who long dreamed of the waterfront as an attractive public space, in a sense it is already mission accomplished, the Miracle on the Macassa complete.

There is still the matter of envisioning ways to link the west harbour with the heavily industrialized east harbour. That might seem a project for well down the road, but Collins said he recently took a tour of Burlington Street with Jim Howlett of the Hamilton Beach Community Council, to explore the untapped potential there for public trail links and increased waterfront access for recreation such as "urban angling."

As for the west harbour, there is still plenty of open acreage to consider, at Pier 8 behind Williams, and directly to the east of it. And so the debate continues, if in a different vein than back in the '70s -- what should the future look like?

A Waterfront Trust plan will advocate adding new restaurants and other commercial development, plus low-rise residential buildings. This, backers like Chad Collins believe, would not only enrich the harbour as a place to visit but also one to live even for people from outside Hamilton.

The vision, he said, is unique to Hamilton Harbour, but the closest comparison is Halifax's waterfront, offering attractions and residential space, but with a small-scale architectural flavour -- the anti-Toronto of waterfronts.

Some new construction has started already. An outdoor NHL-sized skating rink has broken ground behind Williams that will open this winter, and two new restaurants will open their doors on that location, likely by the fall of 2010.

Even conservationists agree that the waterfront can use more amenities. Jim Hudson, executive director of the Bay Area Restoration Council, says he'd like to see more restaurants so long as litter is minimized, and also residential units that turn the west harbour into a vibrant spot 12 months of the year -- so long as the "view shed" isn't compromised by tall buildings that damage the waterfront's sightlines.

"Let's avoid Toronto's mistakes, where they walled off the harbour with high-rise condos."

Hudson added that a prime focus must remain turning the harbour beaches into ones where people are free to swim more often. Currently Bayfront beach is among the most often posted -- closed due to unclean water -- beaches in Ontario. He says the most effective way to create a pristine swimming environment is convincing people not to feed the geese.

He pointed to the city of Racine, Wisc., that was once a rust belt casualty town, but whose beach is now hugely popular, hosting international beach volleyball tournaments that were once held in California.

"Bayfront can become that, too, it is a great beach with fabulous views."

Collins said that while the Waterfront Trust plan will call for new commercial and residential development, it seeks to balance different interests as well. He said the plan will hopefully be finished come the fall, and then presented by city staff to council for their consideration. In the end it will be up to the politicians to decide whether to adopt the vision.

Not everyone supports the Waterfront Trust's approach. There is the view that development has largely gone far enough already, and the city should preserve the rustic and spacious air the waterfront still offers.

Those who have lived and played by the water long before it became fashionable, lobby to have their voices heard. Boaters want their long-held place on the water preserved, and North End residents want development commotion kept to a dull roar. Ever since the parks opened, in fact, those who live nearby expressed concern about noise levels from concerts and traffic.

Given where the west harbour has come from, it's striking that the debate now centres around just how many people should be encouraged to come to the water, not whether they would want to come at all.

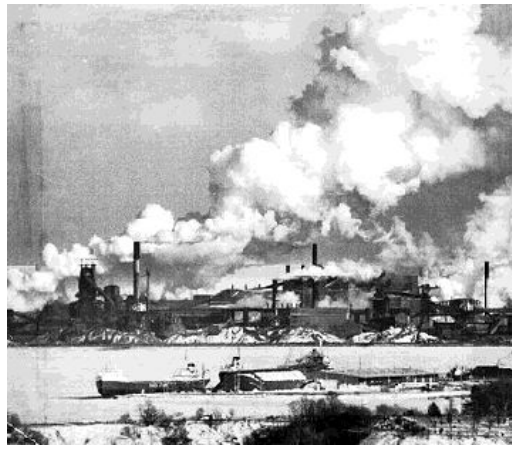
A woman from Grimsby named Karen Lemieux parked her car in the lot on Pier 8 near Williams, after a long search -- 170 of the 180 parking spots were taken.

"I didn't think it would be this busy," she said.

She comes down with her family all the time.

"It's a real hidden treasure. Except I guess it's not hidden anymore."

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