

A walk through the future

Where is Hamilton going? Prosperity comes from its people, from the migration to the downtown, from strong transit services, from environmental cleanups and from innovation. Spectator reporter Wade Hemsworth talked to people who believe in this city, and he envisions how Hamilton will look in the year 2022.

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The future was always with us.

It was not the future of moving sidewalks, monorails or robot maids.

In fact, it was always here -- in our lake, on our Mountain, in the streets that lie between them.

Today, in 2022, it's obvious that Hamilton is healthy again.

Signs of prosperity are everywhere, from the harbour to the airport. Downtown, Barton Street and a half-dozen other neighbourhoods are alive.

Looking back, it's almost funny how long it took for us to appreciate the true depth and nature of our problems, and how quickly a few changes pulled Hamilton out of its long winter.

Sure, it's still a long way from perfect, but no place is perfect. A city is like a person, and everyone could do better.

Hamilton was like the person who hears too often that he or she is ugly and backward and actually begins to believe it. But after an attitude change, some new clothes and a fresh haircut, things started to turn around.

Looking back, it took the outsiders to help us see.

They didn't come willingly. They were pushed by economic and geographic circumstances, no longer able to afford to live in Toronto or its overpriced, congested suburbs, unable to resist at least investigating houses that were selling for a fraction of similar homes mere kilometres away. Greenbelt legislation that limited growth in the original GTA all but corralled them here.

The GO train was what carried them, proving indeed to be the magic bullet it had long been predicted to become. All-day, full service finally made it reasonable to live here and work in Toronto.

And as Toronto finally moved to Hamilton, Hamilton finally began to get over its pointless antagonism and to embrace a more prosperous future.

Turned out, to the amazement of the people who rode in on those trains, there was a whole, fully built city down below the Mountain, with tracts of large brick homes, treed yards, parks -- half empty and going cheap.

Once the people came, so did shops, restaurants and cafes that quickly raised the quality of life, eventually replacing the dollar stores and cheque cashers that had turned parts of the city into a real-life Pottersville from the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*.

The birthplace of the improvement was easy to find. It was the west harbour, where earlier progress with Bayfront and Pier 4 parks finally crossed the tracks after CN sold its rail yard to a public-private partnership. From that grew terraced housing, more parkland, restaurants and shops, becoming everything Toronto's waterfront had not.

The west harbour project drew favourable comparisons to Vancouver, further boosting the buzz that had started when the International Joint Commission removed Hamilton Harbour from its list of Great Lakes toxic hot spots after the poisonous Randle Reef was finally capped.

Once the Red Hill Valley Parkway opened, another pebble fell out of the municipal shoe, leading the way to the rapid development of industrial lands near the airport. The mix of offices and industries there created a fuller, more stable platform for the Hamilton economy, with medium-size employers representing a broad range of businesses -- all seeking relief from the built-out, overpriced industrial parks of the GTA.

Together with the new businesses to emerge from the early successes of the McMaster Innovation Park, those new companies on the Mountain had finally put some new money into the city's tax base.

That, in turn, had helped to dismantle the toxic political culture that had held back so much progress, where decades of extreme partisanship, parochialism, micromanagement and aversion to change had repelled economic development like a force field.

What's more, the GO train had carried the people who would demand better. To go with their commuter trains, they got high-speed bus lines running north and south and east and west across the city, fulfilling a promise that dated way back to the Dalton McGuinty era.

The lower city of the "New Hamilton" as the Toronto papers were calling it, also attracted retirees and empty-nesters from Hamilton's own suburbs, attracted by the proximity to services, and it drew young adults, who had grown up with new environmental ideas and a determination to live and work without owning cars.

Neighbourhoods came out of hibernation, as the economic and social fabric of communities achieved a richer blend of ages, backgrounds and incomes.

Neither the poor nor poverty had disappeared, nor could they ever, but two things had happened. Poverty had been reduced by the improving employment picture, and distributed itself more equitably across Hamilton and Ontario itself after the province had "reloaded" social services costs that Mike Harris had devolved to the cities.

Bringing more people -- more "eyes in the street" -- generated a greater sense of belonging and security, accelerating the rejuvenation.

The long procession of slogans and logos had never been able to turn Hamilton's aspirations into realities, but nothing led like success itself.

Perceptions that had taken two generations to build died hard -- and slowly -- but they died just the same.

What helped was the scientists, students and researchers seeing Hamilton for the first time when they came to work at the innovation park, the Braley research tower behind the General hospital and McMaster's medical training unit downtown.

Today, new hotels are bustling, and though it still doesn't look like downtown will ever be the true commercial heart of the city again, it's certainly busy. Instead of trying to make it back to what it had been, the city's leaders worked -- and they're still working -- to make it into a neighbourhood that happens to be in the middle of the city, a place with the right mix of businesses to serve the people who live and work there.

There are more condos now, some in new buildings built over old parking lots, some in the former ghost buildings that had lined the major streets, haunting hopes for a better future.

In the lobbies of the hotels, real tourists trade enthusiastic conversations about where they've been or where they're planning to go walking: to the harbour, to the trails, to the theatres. So easy, so safe, so surprising, they're saying. You can still hear the surprise in their voices.

Where has Hamilton been all this time?

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This speculative essay is the product of long, free-ranging conversations with four creative, optimistic, yet pragmatic Hamiltonians whose work, both as professionals and volunteers, involves thinking about Hamilton's future, its problems and perceptions.

THEY ARE:

Former regional chairman Terry Cooke, now a private consultant on energy, technology and land development. He is also a director of the Canadian Urban Institute.

John Mokrycke, a Hamilton architect, and a downtown and heritage advocate whose past projects include LIUNA Station.

Walter Peace, an urban geographer and associate professor at McMaster University, a member of the Bay Area Restoration Council and chair of the Hamilton Historical Board.

Joe Urban, founder and president of Urban Advertising + Design, with a long record of volunteer leadership in community cultural, medical and educational organizations.

Monday:

The troubles start at city hall, but there are people looking to change it.

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