

POINTS OF VIEW

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Fix Randle Reef and perception

The hard truth is that when people in Vancouver or Halifax or Montreal think about Hamilton, the image that most often comes to mind is likely of an old, dirty steeltown next to a polluted harbour.

Hamiltonians know steel is only a part in our economy and that health care and research is now our largest player. We know that game fish jump in a cleaner harbour and that we are rich in green space and trails.

But elsewhere, the image is often different – and not always flattering.

It would be easy to say “Who cares what the rest of the world thinks?” But perception influences whether business decides to invest or relocate here, because no company wants to lose valued staff who won’t move to Hamilton. Perception influences whether people come to Hamilton for business or holidays and spend their money here. There have been anecdotal reports for years – and some at present – of people resisting employers’ attempts to move to Hamilton.

Once people get here, they discover that Hamilton is a far better place to live, work and raise a family than they imagined. But the trick is getting them here – or getting them to consider it – in the first place.

Changing perception is difficult, but what can make a difference is something high-profile, newsworthy and symbolic. The removal of Hamilton Harbour from the International Joint Commission’s list of pollution hot spots would be one such move. Containing Randle Reef – a huge underwater deposit of toxic coal tars – is a major part of that.

A York University study reports improving the harbour would have direct and indirect benefits – property values, downtown investment and helping attract top-flight workers, scientists and students – worth nearly \$1 billion. Whether that number is accurate or not, this is a project that should go forward.

The proposed Randle Reef containment, in which a nine-hectare, steel-walled island or peninsula would be created in the harbour between Sherman Avenue and Wentworth Street, is expected to cost \$90 million, a large part of the estimated \$369 million needed between now and 2015 to get the harbour clean enough to come off the hot-spots list.

The containment work has to be done regardless of economic benefits; Randle Reef is by far the most toxic and contaminating spot in the harbour. Blobs of coal tars have been spotted in the water nearby.

But it is about image, too. For Hamilton to make the transformation in the national consciousness from Rustbucket City to Renaissance City, it must do the big things. This city must show the rest of Canada that whatever they thought they knew about Hamilton, it’s likely out of date.

Robert Howard