

Randle Reef cleanup is a top priority: mayor

BY ERIC McGUINNESS

Hamilton Mayor Fred Eisenberger says the \$90-million cleanup of Randle Reef is one of his highest priorities.

“It doesn’t transcend all priorities, but it’s top of the list,” he said at a weekend “bringing back the bay” meeting attended by four MPPs, two MPs and several dozen other people involved in the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan.

Halton Regional Chair Gary Carr said “it needs to be fixed” and local politicians have to work together in a non-partisan way to get it done.

Environment Canada’s John Shaw said the proposed plan to contain and cap the contaminated sediment, creating an eight-hectare peninsula with shipping terminals surrounded by green space, calls the cost to be shared three ways by the federal government, province and local interests.

Carr said the chances of getting federal and provincial aid now are better than a decade ago because Ottawa has a record surplus and Ontario’s deficit is

dropping, unlike the 1990s when both were cutting back.

“The good news is the money is out there. We can get this done if we have the full commitment of the people around this table. We can resolve this.”

The group also heard from Ed Hanna, a researcher from York University’s Institute for Research and Innovation in Sustainability, which has developed a computer model that forecasts governments, business and the people of Hamilton and Halton will benefit to the tune of nearly a billion dollars when the harbour is clean enough to come off the list of Great Lakes pollution hot spots.

Hanna said the model shows shedding the stigma of being “a dirty, polluted steeltown — a change in the way people look at Hamilton — is one of the most powerful forces in terms of benefits” delisting will bring.

In explaining the new benefits-simulation program, he said it is only a forecast — “use it as an indication, not fact,” — and noted that not all potential benefits are included, only those that

can easily be expressed in economic terms.

Al Peckham, chair of the Hamilton Port Authority, promised to support the cleanup, saying: “I don’t think it’s about money. It’s just the right thing to do.”

NDP Hamilton Centre MPP Andrea Horwath said area politicians — regardless of party affiliation — “have to put our heads together, our pocket-books together. This has got to be the priority because the opportunities it provides are enormous.”

David Sweet, Conservative MP for Ancaster-Flamborough-Dundas-Westdale, said he still had “a lot of questions I want to ask” about the project, but would take the meeting’s message to the federal ministers of finance, environment and transport.

Hamilton Mountain Liberal MPP Marie Bountrogianni, provincial minister of intergovernmental affairs, attended but did not have a chance to comment.

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HOW BAD IS RANDLE REEF?

■ Second-worst coal tar contamination in Canada, behind the Sydney Tar Ponds in Nova Scotia, where a century of coke and coal gas manufacture left one million tonnes of contaminated soil and sediment.

The federal and provincial governments began a 10-year, \$400-million, cleanup of the Sydney site in 2004.

■ Mud to a depth of three metres or more is laced with chemicals so toxic they burn human skin and if inhaled cause anaphylactic shock — a severe allergic reaction. There’s enough hazardous material to fill Copps Coliseum to the roof three times.

■ The sediment is so toxic to underwater creatures that 80 hectares of the harbour floor is essentially a dead zone. Fish that survive have growth and reproductive disorders.

■ John Shaw of Environment Canada calls it “a spill in slow motion,” because contaminants deposited in the Sherman Inlet as far back as the 19th century are spreading outward and leaching up into the harbour water. “The more diffuse it gets, the more difficult it becomes to implement solutions,” he warns.