

Summary of the discussion at a meeting regarding the Thousand Islands Parkway

Friday, October 21, 2005 at noon at Parks Canada Visitors' Centre, Mallorytown Landing

Present:

Dennis Arrowsmith, Councillor LTI Township
David Bull, Executive Director, TIARA
Gary Clarke, Eastern Ontario Tourism
Jennifer Dalrymple, Planner, St. Lawrence Parks Commission
Harold Emmons, Councillor, LTI Township
Gord Giffin, Superintendent, St. Lawrence Islands National Park
Barry Hughes, Manager of Park Operations, St. Lawrence Parks Commission
Brad Johnson, Brad Johnson + Associates Limited
Douglas Mackintosh, Councillor LTI Township
Joe Pal, Sr., Resident
Joe Pal Jr., Resident
Don Ross, Executive Director of Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve
Julie Salter-Keane, Planner, LTI Township

Regrets:

Harold Grier, Mayor, LTI Township
Mark Pergunas, Mayor, Front of Yonge Township
Dave Warner, Past President, Thousand Islands Watershed Land Trust.

Blu Mackintosh and David Bull took notes.

Douglas began the meeting with an Introduction: The 1000 Islands area is an amazing resource. For many visitors, the Parkway is the only impression they have of the 1000 Islands. We need to find ideas for its future that can be implemented. The American side of the River, where lack of planning has resulted in a disaster, serves as a warning. There is a danger that the Thousand Islands Parkway might become not a parkway, but just a street. Douglas then introduced Brad whose presentation led into the general discussion.

Brad described the challenge for the future. We can do nothing, and allow the area to develop according to local planning. Or "we" - that is, people and organizations who are concerned about the long-range future of the 1000 Islands - can help shape and guide this development. By understanding both the special attributes of the area and the needs of those who live or visit here, a balance can be achieved between them, based on the long-range capability of the land to accommodate those needs, i.e. sustainable development.

Tremendous pressure will continue to grow (e.g. from China) for tourist facilities, but the goose laying the golden eggs could be killed by too much "success" if the environment were thereby harmed. Business would in fact thrive if the environment were well managed, and this is, in fact, the philosophy of the Biosphere. Everyone has goals and problems with regard to this land and its future. These, and the resources we have to work with, have to be well understood if we are all to co-operate in achieving sustainability. Even a small start at

reaching this kind of balance would act as an example, and others would emulate it. Our quality of life is a result of how we bring these values together.

Brad had been amazed to read national statistics of just a few years ago that showed that, except for rural Saskatchewan, Eastern Ontario has the poorest record in hotel room occupancy and the lowest level of room rate charges. Gary added that this region is also below the provincial average in this regard, in spite of the richness of its assets and its excellent access to a major transportation corridor. It has a 58% occupancy rate, where a breakeven point might be more like 60% - 64%. Low occupancy rates lead to a downward spiral of poor maintenance and inadequate marketing. Brad said the quality of the region's services did not reflect the quality of its ecological assets which are evidently not fully appreciated. There is very little to offer tourists which reflects the quality of this outstanding area. He gave examples of how tremendous opportunities are being squandered in even simple ways, e.g. a magnificent view of the river being blocked by an ugly plastic playground or a large billboard. Obtrusive traffic signs as large as those on the 401 are not needed on the Parkway where cars travel more slowly.

Barry gave a short history of the Parkway, starting in 1938 when the new Bridge led to this new stretch of road built with no clear idea of how it would be used. Early ideas of how to deal with tributaries to the St. Lawrence were misguided (e.g. dumping fill to block off Jones Creek instead of putting in a culvert). Original plans to make the Parkway into a dual carriageway were later scrapped, leaving the "north lane" unpaved. (Today, there are access controls on new entrances from the south side; new accesses to the north side have to use entrances leading off the north lane.) The St. Lawrence Parks Commission was given responsibility for the Parkway in 1971 with a finite sum from the Province for snow removal and maintenance. Garbage pick-up has always been a problem. Unsightly dumpsters were always overflowing and the service was abused. The Parkway was originally called 2S, "The Scenic", but features like parkettes and river lookouts have gradually deteriorated. The Parks Commission has no budget for protection and development of the Parkway and in any case, the Act gives it very little power in this regard. The Commission can only hope to use its influence when decisions are made.

Douglas felt that people often resist being told what to do with their own land. Dennis cited Rockport, where planning proposals require a compromise between those with new ideas and those who resist change. Brad pointed out that there will always be opposition. However, Gord said it was difficult to function in an atmosphere of constant conflict, or one in which the environment was always seen as counter to development. Councils often put a value only on that which can be bought and sold. These points of confrontation are often not based on sound knowledge. Planning should not be a fight between conservation and development.

Gary felt that one problem was the assessment system. It is encouraging the "rape and pillage" of the Parkway. Retirees are unable to pay increased taxes. Barry added that social fabric is destroyed when farmers find no reward in staying on the farm. The system does not reflect every aspect of the land's value. What tools can we develop to accurately assess the value of the Parkway? Consideration should be given, for instance, to the value of wetlands or the protection of endangered species in assessing the area's "natural capital". Brad said we need an inventory of values, not just real estate values, but scenic, ecological,

social and cultural ones as well. We need to look at the 1000 Islands area as a whole, and encourage a real understanding of the entire complex. Gord also pointed out that the Parkway was part of a broader area, all of which should be looked at as one entity.

Sustainable tourism is attracting support at the national and provincial level, and the new Provincial Policy Statement (Planning) requires municipalities to “have regard” for the concept in their planning, so it is at the county and municipal level that the real challenge comes. The environment we have here is a unique resource, and needs to be thoroughly understood if it is to be properly managed.

We have to have a long-range vision. We must imagine what the Parkway will be like in 50 years if we do nothing now - and decide if that is what we really want. Gord pointed out that at the moment, between Kingston and Brockville, only 2% of the land is under any form of conservation – and there are many forms available. We can look at success in other areas. (Comparisons were made with the Niagara Parkway.) Could Parks Canada be the organization to encourage a process of analysis, whereby we can take stock of the area’s assets, values and opportunities? Could the Biosphere lead the way? Gary pointed out that because of the research done in preparation for the Biosphere application, this may be one of the best documented areas in the country. However, the Biosphere has no money nor any mandate specifically focussed on the Parkway. Its strength is to gather players together and facilitate projects such as this one.

To conclude the discussion, Brad asked for suggestions for next steps. The group agreed that it should arrange to meet again. In the meantime, the Biosphere Reserve will do some research and explore the possibility that a third-party study, possibly at Queen’s, might be appropriate, with this group steering it.