

10 January 2009

Dear Editor,

In an ideal world, our appointed and elected officials would govern out of wisdom—or would at least value wisdom and cultivate ways to let it inform their professional lives. In a less than ideal world, the one in which we live, we still expect our officials to shape public policy guided by knowledge, reason, and integrity. It is deeply disappointing, therefore, to witness Legislator John Ceretto, Niagara Tourism president John Percy, Transportation Authority Trustee Henry Sloma, and Niagara Greenway Commissioner Richard Soluri promoting personal agendas while hiding behind a group of Niagara University students who conducted a feasibility study of trolleys to carry tourists from Niagara Falls to Lewiston, NY.

These so-called project leaders are anti-gorge parkway removal, (two of them, Percy and Soluri, are members of the Parkway Preservation Committee); it is no surprise the students have chosen the parkway as the main route for the trolleys to reach Lewiston from Niagara Falls and, thus, the trolleys on parkway becomes a reason to oppose its removal and the restoration of natural landscapes as proposed by the Niagara Heritage Partnership. Senator George Maziarz can be lumped in with the above-mentioned project leaders; he supported the trolley-parkway idea at a public meeting on 4 Dec. 2008 where he criticized City of Niagara Falls expenditures and suggested their share of casino money be used to help establish the trolley. Not one of the project leaders noted that commercial traffic on the parkway is prohibited by law.

This group of trolley/parkway advocates does a disservice to the public at large, and to the students, who have been led to believe they've imagined something worthwhile when, in fact, they have not. They were used. Perhaps that is an important lesson for them to learn, as well.

A genuine study involves close examination, careful investigation, an inquiry into the issue at hand, learning about the subject, especially by reading. The students appear not to have done this, in spite of each of them being given (by me) on 22 Oct. 2008, two documents, "The Niagara Heritage Partnership Proposal for the Removal of the Robert Moses Parkway and Restoration of Natural Landscapes," and "NHP Remarks on the Feasibility Study for a Tourist Trolley Route Between Niagara Falls and Lewiston, NY," and being referred to the NHP website: [www.niagaraheritage.org](http://www.niagaraheritage.org). Both documents can be found there. Professor Angus of Niagara University had been gracious enough to invite me to speak to the students who were to work on the feasibility study. I was pleased to do so, but clearly failed to persuade them that recommending trolleys on the parkway would be a negative thing, ignoring a widely supported, sound rationale for total removal with widespread beneficial impacts. They seemed equally unimpressed by both my statement that eco-tourism was the fastest growing industry around the world, and by my off-handed remark that a 50-story hotel could be built in a few months, but an old growth forest took 150 years to establish itself.

If the students had investigated the NHP initiative, however, they might have been prepared to discuss the cultural, botanical, historical, and economical potentials they were willing to sacrifice for a trolley to carry tourists to Lewiston businesses. They weren't, though. But we shouldn't be too hard on the students. They had only six weeks to thoroughly consider the issues. Ceretto, Maziarz, Sloma, and Soluri have had twelve years and they haven't done it, either.

The removal of the gorge parkway and restoration of natural landscapes would create a nearly self-sustaining environment attractive to eco-tourists, a ribbon of wilderness extending north from the natural phenomenon of the falls past the Old Growth Forest at DeVeaux Woods, Whirlpool, Devil's Hole, to the wildlife refuge on the Lewiston Plateau, and beyond to Joseph Davis State Park, to Fort Niagara, a varied, environmental viewscape for hiking, bicycling, bird watching, plant, wildflower, and butterfly identification, photography, and other activities appealing to families who enjoy green vacations. This population would not be drawn, obviously, from those who might select the Galapagos Islands for a vacation or the rain forests of Costa Rica, but would consist of a mid-range ecotourist demographic, families, couples, organization members—a new group of tens of thousands, if not hundreds, a group who would respond to the green marketing of our region. The Niagara Frontier almost asks to be packaged for eco-tourists: the shores of the upper Niagara and Lake Ontario, the winter gorge for numbers and varieties of visiting gulls, the Klydell Wetlands in North Tonawanda, the Iroquois National Reserve, and other areas. Special bird watching tours that incorporate hotel package deals and other incentives could extend the season here both spring and fall, when over 40 species of migrating warblers visit us, for example.

A restoration project of this magnitude in a world-famous location would create world-wide attention for years as forests regenerated and native understory plants were nurtured and established. Film makers would create documentaries. Articles would be written, both scholarly and for the popular press, newspapers, magazines, Olmsted devotees, landscape architects and restorationists, botanists, high school and university classes and programs with environmental and ecological concentrations would schedule visits, classes or tours. The publicity generated by the project would be worth millions. If there were ever a proposal that begged for a proper and thorough study, this is it. Perhaps the county might convince John Percy to come back from India long enough to oversee such a study and to formulate a strategic marketing plan. County casino funds could pay for it. Senator Maziarz could probably find significant additional funding. Senator Thompson should be strongly involved in support of this revitalization of Niagara Falls, especially the business districts. Senator Schumer would also be involved since his unwavering advocacy for our region being designated a National Heritage Area is so compatible with the proposal for total gorge parkway removal.

In the meantime, if the Village of Lewiston is so eager to siphon off, via the parkway, what they see as the river of tourist money flowing into Niagara Falls, Niagara Greenway Commissioner Soluri, who is also the Mayor of Lewiston, should approach the city about having the Village annexed by Niagara Falls. The Village could then pay property taxes, and bed taxes, and other fees to Niagara Falls and the attempt to trolley tourists to Lewiston would seem less self-serving.

Sincerely,  
Bob Baxter, Conservation Chair  
Niagara Heritage Partnership  
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