

Dear Editor,

Soon 2014 will begin--and 17 years will have passed since the Niagara Heritage Partnership first proposed the Robert Moses Parkway be totally removed between Niagara Falls and Lewiston NY. This is the gorge rim parkway which, as was proposed, should be totally removed so that the area could be restored to natural landscapes (with hiking and bicycling trails running the entire length); this restoration would be an extension of the Olmsted-inspired park at the Falls, and have the potential to be the focus of a newly developed, regional market for ecotourism at Niagara.

These efforts were grassroots from the beginning, eventually extending to a Wild Ones Niagara Chapter, which succeeded in obtaining a grant (\$140,000) from the Niagara River Greenway Commission and the City of Niagara Falls to study the total removal proposition and its rationale. The name of the study was "Regional Economic Growth through Ecological Restoration of the Niagara Gorge Rim;" the study (by EDR) supported the economic and environmental premises it was designed to investigate: in short, they concluded, removal was a good idea. There were sufficient funds available to accomplish the task of total removal and it would make economic sense to do so; there were no opposing views that stood up to honest scrutiny; there was, indeed, a market for significant economic growth for the region via a developed ecotourism market.

Unfortunately, these conclusions are being ignored by most local politicians and state agencies, such as The Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP), also known as State Parks, which has been busily engaged in knee-jerk responses (the so-called "pilot project"), general stone-walling, and in hiring a consultant to first collect and then justify ideas derived from what amounted to a local "public opinion" poll, the subject of which was: "What do you think we should do with the gorge parkway?" Opinions that leapt off the top of people's heads have now been turned into "options." The Parson's Group (the consultant hired by OPRHP to do a "scoping") has now been sequestered for over three years while the mirrors needed to justify a selection of "options" are being adjusted, turned this way and that. The one interim report issued during this time was an affront to logic, a mishmash of double talk that implied total

removal was still an option while retaining some version of the parkway was one of its stated goals. (The detailed critique of this report is posted on the website mentioned below, under Recent Postings, titled: "The NHP Evaluation of the Niagara Gorge Corridor Project, Robert Moses Parkway-North Segment, Scoping Report Presentation.")

The cost for this justification thus far has been over three quarters of a million dollars and counting. The conclusions of the EDR study will not be considered because they weren't made available to the consultant team before their "deadline." What sort of mental gymnastics, in a world of reason, justifies ignoring available evidence?

The brief history of the issue presented here is necessarily lacking in supporting detail and evidence; both are posted in abundance at www.niagaraheritage.org.

Additional evidence in support of total removal is also being ignored; there are large numbers in favor of total removal: over 4,000 individuals have signed petitions, and 85 organizations, some state and national, with a membership base of over one million. Accumulating these names and groups over the years is precisely what common sense and progressive action demanded. If a business, for example, proposes to manufacture green widgets, it's wise to investigate the potential market. When millions indicate they'd purchase a green widget, that's a signal the plan is on track.

Here, in the case of parkway removal, while we've compiled impressive supporting numbers, we've scarcely scratched the surface; hundreds of thousands of more people in search of natural vacations for groups and families stand ready to visit. We could offer tours designed especially for them; they could design their own, online, encompassing the region. (*See the concept for a map in "Remarks to the OPRHP including Tourist Map Suggestions."*) We could use direct marketing techniques to encourage groups to hold conferences here for extended stays.

But when those opposed are not studiously ignoring this evidence of strong support for total removal, what is their reaction? They've said, "Those people aren't from around here." Our response to that is: "Yes, that's one definition of tourists."

Additionally, in response to critics who've long insisted the NHP was unwilling to compromise, we have, in fact, compromised. In accordance with EDR findings, which determined the stretch of parkway between Findlay Drive and the City line was the most significant and should be the first section removed, we agreed that totally removing the

parkway from downtown Niagara Falls to the City line at Devil's Hole would still permit the goal of developing an ecotourism market and we'd be willing to settle for that. This we did in spite of the fact that unrestricted parkway traffic would still be permitted to drive over the power project and under one end of the Lewiston-Queenston Bridge, something we'd argued was a threat to homeland security. We'd written to the proper authorities about this, and also informed Senator Maziarz and Assemblyman Cerreto (neither of whom responded). All of this is a matter of public record and is posted on the NHP site.

Those interested in further details might read the following, listed under Recent Postings: "Time for Senator Maziarz to Step Up on Parkway Removal," "Letter to Assemblyman John Cerreto," and "Ecotourism Best Way to Extend Tourism at Niagara."

Currently, on the 3rd of December, 2013, it was announced that Niagara University plans to develop a center for "high-tech innovation" regarding tourism development. This center has been named the Niagara Global Tourism Institute, and as such, according to Bonnie Rose, Niagara University's vice president of academic affairs, will focus their "strong commitment and drive" to "bring everything we have home to Niagara Falls and Western New York as quickly as possible." It's already been linked with the realization of The Niagara Experience Center, a good thing. Mayor Dyster of Niagara Falls strongly supports the Institute. The *Buffalo News* has written an editorial strongly in support, though one element of their support notes that "the ability to tap deeply into the potential surrounding the falls" is something the "Canadians long ago figured out and why so many tourists admire the natural wonder...from the other side of the border." What the *News* has yet to figure out is that it's geography that makes the view better from Canada not Canadians "figuring something out," and that no Tourism Institute will change that.

That point aside (though it's not a minor one if that perception shapes early attitudes that might influence the Institute), one of the Tourist Institute's initial investigations should be: Which new populations of tourists could be directly marketed with the gorge parkway totally removed and the restoration of natural scenery underway? All the facets of ecotourism should be the major focus. The Institute has stated the mapping "out of assets that we have" will be one of their first research projects; for a list of the regional assets we have related to wildlife, of interest especially to birders,

www.nfwhc.org would be of help. The Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, among others, should also be consulted.

Envisioning a vital new park along the gorge rim, young trees beginning to grow, long-grass, wildflower meadows attracting ground nesting birds, butterflies fluttering in this serene landscape, the Old Growth Forest at DeVeaux extending its edges toward Whirlpool Park where it will flourish into an Old Growth over a century from now for those not yet born--and then imagining the naturalists, hikers and hiking clubs, the bicyclists, photographers, artist-painters, those interested in the restoration, the reclaiming, of natural scenery, the botanists for native plant life unique to this area, geologists, and others for whom the park would be attractive year around, summer and winter, spring and fall for migrating birds, and for the autumn foliage--this is necessary for the Tourism Institute if it is genuinely interested in the use of "cutting-edge innovation" to revitalize the tourism market here at Niagara.

Sincerely,

Bob Baxter

Conservation Chair

Niagara Heritage Partnership