

Setting Sail

Charting a Course for the Continuing Evolution of Hamilton's West Harbour

Tim Smith and Diana Tavares-Morreale

In the most recent issue of the Journal, readers were introduced to Hamilton's diverse West Harbour and to Setting Sail, the land-use and transportation study recently completed for this area of historic neighbourhoods, significant brownfield sites, an active rail yard and waterfront amenities. This article delves deeper to tell the story of a master plan and secondary plan process that may be unprecedented, at least in Ontario, in its approach to integrating issues and engaging the public.

West Harbour has been a vital, mixed-use community and recreational destination since the 19th century, but in many respects has remained Hamilton's best-kept secret. In the view from the Skyway, it is dwarfed by steel mills. And although it lies immediately north of downtown, the waterfront is difficult to find. The City recognized that waterfront access, and transportation generally, would be a central issue for Setting Sail, so decided to follow the integrated master plan process under the Environmental Assessment Act. The EA process demanded a rigour unusual for a secondary plan, but meant that the City would end up with comprehensive land use policies and clear directions for the infrastructure improvements needed to support the land use vision.

As it turned out, some infrastructure improvements were not needed. In the 1960s, the City had proposed building a road through West Harbour to link Highway 403 with the City's then-thriving port industrial area. Land was acquired, but the so-called Perimeter Road was never built. Setting Sail provided the opportunity to revisit the Perimeter Road idea and determine once and for all if it will ever be needed. The conclusion was no. Given lower-than-previous traffic projections, the availability of alternative routes, the difficulty of connecting to the 403 and the enormous cost of the undertaking, the concept was rejected. Council agreed. Hamilton has thus avoided erecting the kind of barrier that has hampered waterfront renewal in many other cities.

The Perimeter Road was just one issue discussed in the Opportunities and Challenges report that concluded Phase One

of the EA process. From our analyses of land use, open space, access and barriers, traffic, public transit, servicing infrastructure and environmental concerns, five opportunities emerged:

- create a cohesive, multi-use waterfront that capitalizes on its harbour setting;
- strengthen existing neighbourhoods by phasing out noxious industrial uses and redeveloping vacant and underutilized land;
- create a linked system of open spaces and trails;
- improve the function, appearance and accessibility of existing neighbourhood parks;
- improve connections between the waterfront and the city.



One of West Harbour's greatest assets is its rich built heritage

extensions of adjacent neighbourhood fabric at varying densities. We evaluated the options using more than 50 environmental criteria as well as public feedback. Overall "best-case" and "worst-case" scenarios were analyzed from a traffic perspective. The resulting Preferred Land Use Strategy was a hybrid, balancing the need for a critical mass of population to animate the waterfront year-round with the desire to moderate building heights, protect existing parkland and preserve land for marine recreation.

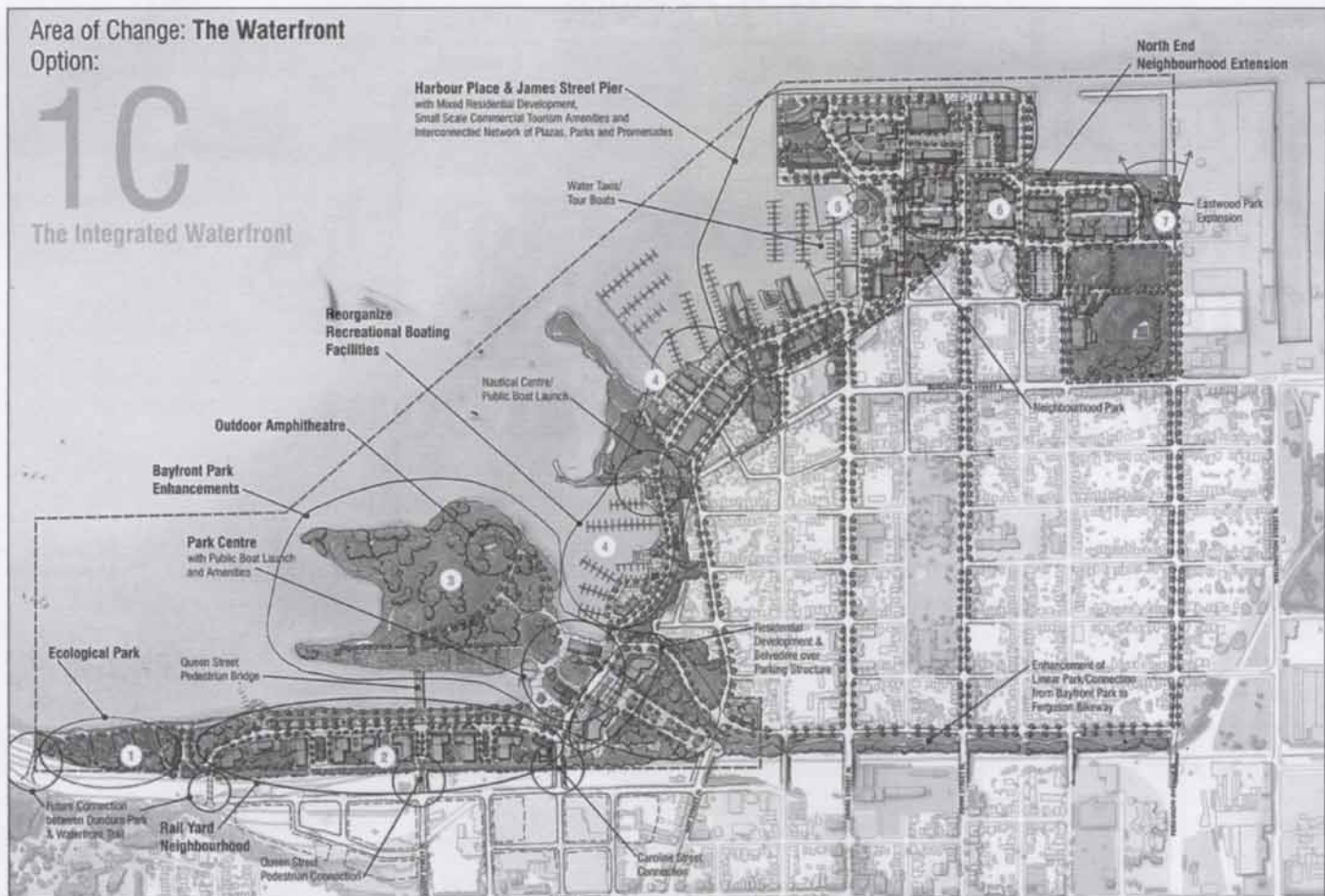
A very public process

We engaged local residents and the larger Hamilton community in different forums and provided regular project updates, as well

Area of Change: The Waterfront
Option:

1C

The Integrated Waterfront



Demonstration plans illustrated the land use options

as reports and other documents, on the City's website.

We began in fall 2002 by interviewing more than 60 representatives from neighbourhood associations, business groups, industry, marinas and boat clubs, and other organizations, as well as city staff and councillors. A visioning workshop brought together key stakeholders. The themes from the workshop were translated into eight core principles that are the foundation for the West Harbour Secondary Plan. The first in a series of public open houses was held in January 2003 to invite feedback on Opportunities and Challenges. The second, at which the Land Use Options were on display, was attended by more than 300 people.

The Preferred Land Use Strategy was presented at a third open house in fall 2003. In March 2004, open houses were held at Liuna Station within the study area, and in Ancaster and Stoney Creek. Draft land use policies and mapping, along with the recommended alternative for the transportation master plan, were presented at an open house in fall 2004.

A Community Liaison Committee (CLC) was created early in the process to ensure regular input from key stakeholders. With a membership of over 50, representing the full spectrum of interests in West Harbour, the CLC proved unwieldy at first, but as the Secondary Plan and Transportation Master Plan began to take shape, its contribution became critical. A series of issue-specific meetings, co-chaired by members of the CLC, focused on concerns such as traffic, parking and the height and density of new development. We used a database of Issues and Replies to track CLC comments, responses from the study team, and revisions to the draft Secondary Plan.

The plan

In March 2005, City Council approved the West Harbour Secondary Plan and Transportation Master Plan. The land use vision calls for the conversion of industrial lands to residential, neighbourhood commercial, and institutional uses in a manner that reinforces and extends the existing grid of streets. Additional policies support the intensification of West Harbour's transit corridors to strengthen their commercial role and improve the pedestrian realm. Infill development must respect the character of the existing neighbourhoods. The Transportation Master Plan establishes a hierarchy of streets, describes the role and cross-sections for each type, and sets out a strategy to ensure the impacts of waterfront development are monitored and mitigated.

The plan for the waterfront might be best described as balanced. The existing major parks, with added amenities, remain central, and new residential, mixed-use and institutional development is focused on Pier 8. The policies for Pier 8 allow for a mix of mid-rise housing, shops, restaurants and cultural attractions that complement the new Marine Discovery Centre. Extensions of existing streets will create a grid and terminate at a 30-metre-wide water's edge promenade. Pier 9, home to a naval base, and the Catherine Street Basin provide a buffer between the urbanized waterfront and the commercial port to the east. The civic heart of the waterfront will be at the foot of James Street, Hamilton's north-south main street, where the plan calls for a public pier and a plaza.

Challenges ahead

Although the EA approach lengthened the study process, it ensured clear answers to tough questions and broad community support for the Secondary Plan's vision.

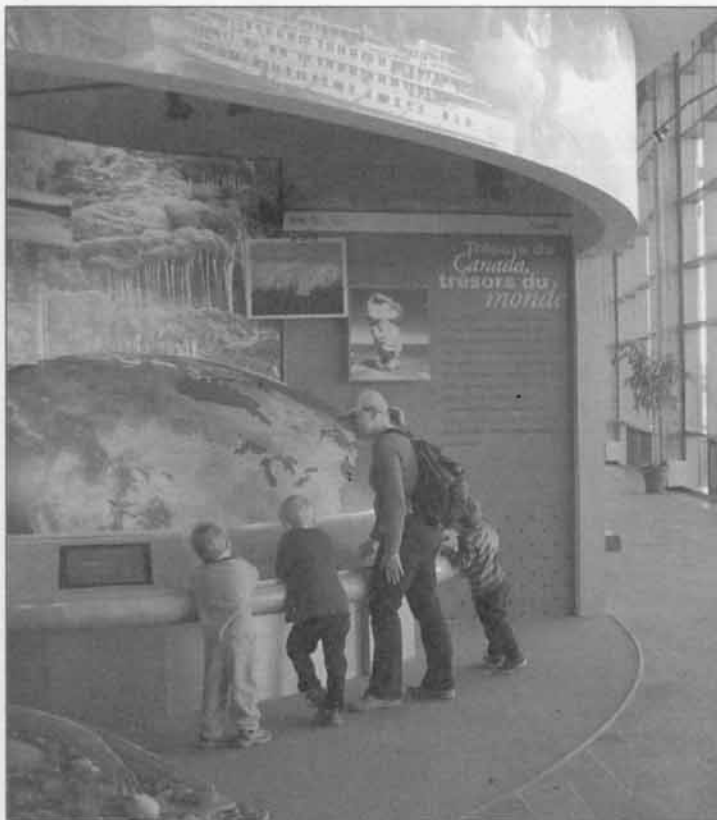
As always, further hurdles lie on the path to implementation. CN has appealed the secondary plan, arguing that new housing is inappropriate within 300 metres of its active rail yard. Not all residents are satisfied that traffic issues have been resolved. A Recreation Master Plan is needed to improve the appearance and accessibility of the boating areas on the waterfront. The City and the Hamilton Port Authority, which continues to lease much of Pier 8, must work cooperatively to facilitate development on this pivotal site.

Nevertheless, the city is well on its way to creating a one-of-a-kind waterfront and supporting downtown living. The Hamilton community will find ways to overcome any remaining barriers.

For more information about Setting Sail, attend the West Harbour Mobile Workshop at the OPPI Conference or visit www.hamilton.ca/settingsail.


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The new Marine Discovery Centre is joined by other cultural attractions and a residential community in the land use vision for Pier 8

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