

October 30, 2006

Dear Editor,

In 1997, the Niagara Heritage Partnership proposed that all four lanes of the Robert Moses Parkway along the gorge between Niagara Falls and Lewiston should be removed and that natural landscapes be restored with a bicycling and a hiking trail. The potential benefits were clear:

1) tourists and other prospective customers would be encouraged to drive the streets of city business districts, Third Street, Pine Avenue, Main Street, etc., where their presence would help to stimulate further business investments and development.

2) direct marketing techniques would attract a new population of local visitors and ecotourists. (Groups with a combined membership of about one million have already supported the proposal.)

The proposal met with opposition, concentrated among those townships and villages north of the City of Niagara Falls. The opposing arguments were weak in the late nineties and are weak currently, although decisions are often made in our region (as well as elsewhere) for political reasons and not on the basis of sound reasoning. Opponents of parkway removal in Lewiston and Porter have recently hired a PR firm, E-3 Communications, and formed a group they call the "Parkway Preservation Committee," which they believe will focus their political clout. We believe it's an attempt to put a positive spin on their obstructionist intentions. Perhaps the PR firm suggested the name.

In short, this "committee" intends to obstruct or prevent plans for gorge parkway removal, especially between Findlay Drive and Devil's Hole, which also happens to be the most ecologically, historically, and culturally significant portion.

Parkway removal opponents say that we can keep a two lane commuter road and people can still hike along the gorge. This point of view is true enough if we're willing to settle for a bankrupt idea that's rooted in ignorance and political expedience while it continues to debase our heritage. This point of view is echoed by Lewiston Mayor Soluri, also a Greenway Commissioner and co-chair of the anti-removal committee as follows: "You can do both. You can still have a roadway and picnic area and have access to the gorge."

NHP has not, of course, been advocating for a "picnic area." We've repeatedly proposed "restored natural landscapes," that realize the vision of Frederick Law Olmsted. Does Soluri translate "restored natural landscapes" into "picnic area"? Does he really believe tens of thousands of people have been advocating for four lane gorge parkway removal to put in a "picnic area"? It's possible, we suppose. It would explain a lot. We say "Olmsted" and Soluri hears "picnic area." We say "wildlife refuge" and Soluri hears "dumpsite," and so on.

Those who tend to agree with Soluri's viewpoint, which already changes an old saying into "we can have our cake and eat it too," should realize he's further modified it to "we can have our cake and eat Niagara Falls' cake, too." They should read the next three sentences carefully to see if they make sense:

Keeping two lanes of the parkway open, with existing signage, will continue to encourage and direct tourists to detour Niagara Falls. Significant numbers of a new population of tourists who seek "green" vacations will not visit here to walk, hike or bicycle alongside a commuter road. Access to the gorge is severely diminished by parkway lanes, even two of them, and having two walkover bridges in six miles and painting crosswalks over asphalt in other locations will not be much help.

The simple truth and logic of these sentences may not be evident to some people. These people resist being convinced by facts and reasoned opinion. They merely want to keep repeating what they said to start with, and there's not much anyone can do about that.

1) Parkway removal opponents say it's a convenient commuter route to Niagara Falls. That's true. But, these opponents mention only Lewiston Road as an alternative route. THEY REFUSE TO ACKNOWLEDGE other alternative routes: Hyde Park Blvd.; Highland Avenue/Eleventh Street/Portage Road; the I-190; Military Road. QUESTIONS: What's wrong with these alternative routes? Would parkway removal opponents please tell us? Are a few minutes of personal convenience for a relatively small number of commuters more important than restored natural environments tied to economic benefits for the entire region? If the "committee" doesn't know how to answer the questions, the PR firm they hired might be able to advise them what to say.

QUESTIONS: Should the City of Niagara Falls, NY be obligated to keep a parkway and signage that encourages tourists to detour the city and its business districts in favor of villages, townships, and attractions seven or more miles distant? Would retaining the parkway be an example of regionalism? The answers to these questions are, of course, no and no. In fact, some say the City's first responsibility is to City businesses and its residents. Towns and villages to the north should see the preceding paragraph for alternative routes and then devote their energies to providing promotional information and good maps to tourists for whose dollars they can compete with other communities.

We don't believe parkway removal opponents will respond to these comments. They've been unable to respond meaningfully for nearly ten years, because facts simply do not support their assertions, and nothing's changed. Without a rationale to support their position, they've resorted to hiring a PR firm. This firm may have been counselled them to take their claim of 30,000 supporters (which exceeds the population of the northtowns by nearly 7,000) behind the scenes to pressure local politicians, other policy-makers, and agencies they believe might be influenced. They'll neglect to mention that a significant percent of their inflated number is comprised of reasonable and thoughtful people who disagree with their views and that another significant percent is comprised of children too young to weigh argumentative evidence.

But parkway removal opponents love behind the scenes work, where logic is not so heavily weighed, having successfully blocked the issue in the relicensing process, including, thus far, in Niagara Greenway planning. And so their recent move to hire a professional manipulator of opinion and decision makers comes as no surprise.

Sincerely,  
Bob Baxter, Conservation Chair  
Niagara Heritage Partnership