

Dear Editor,

For many years there has been general public recognition that State Parks (OPRHP), via parking fees, restaurants (including food shacks), and souvenir stores, have greatly reduced the income of private enterprises in the City of Niagara Falls. This has persisted through a succession of State Parks administrations, though the current one appears especially determined to strengthen its grip on commercial possibilities.

Every meal or soft drink purchased at a Goat Island restaurant is a meal or soft drink not purchased in a Niagara Falls restaurant; every souvenir bought on Goat Island or at Prospect Point is a souvenir sitting on a shelf in a Niagara Falls shop; every ten dollar parking fee paid to the State, and there are tens of thousands during the season, is a fee not paid to a private lot owner outside the park.

As if the relentless pursuit of these tourist dollars by the State isn't enough, an additional slap in the face is that this pursuit is most often in direct conflict with the stewardship that Parks should feel obligated to honor: the Frederick Law Olmsted philosophy on which the parks at Niagara were established clearly states these money-making activities (and other artificial, that is, man-made "attractions") were to be shunned in favor of having them located in the City, thereby preserving, and not detracting from, the natural landscapes of the parks. And yet, in spite of Parks consistently violating this principle, the Olmsted philosophy is often cited as their guiding light.

What would Olmsted think of the artificial-looking stone pavers being put down in various Goat Island and other locations in the interest of "visual consistency"? Would he applaud the plans to relocate the Tesla statue to yet another spot on the Island? (Only recently the possibility of relocating the statue off the Island has arisen.) Would Olmsted cheer for the new boulder, located off-center on a bulge of new walkway of patio-looking tiles, suddenly appearing at Terrapin Point? Is this where the proposed Wallenda plaque will appear? Will there be an installation celebration at which Wallenda and Senator Maziarz will be smiling for the cameras? Will Frederick Law Olmsted be mentioned?

The Niagara Tourism and Convention Corp. (NTCC) has a new three-year contract pending—and we can all agree: given the old business-as-usual model that NTCC's been given to work with, the agency does a great job of promoting, in addition to Niagara Falls, attractions from locations across the county. Here's an attraction, there's an attraction; it's a regional promotion. The large part of this is paid for by the City of Niagara Falls, but still.

But OPRHP, locally under the direction of Mark Thomas, isn't helping to envision a unifying theme. Some say Niagara Falls sells itself for the most part, and so it's "Come to Niagara, see the waterfalls and we'll give you a grab-bag of things to do. Here's the list: visit the Cave of the Winds, ride on the Maid of the Mist, visit our old fort, hire a fishing charter, eat a meal at the Culinary Institute, take a Wine Trail tour, ride a jet-boat, a Canal boat, see the merry-go-round museum, etc." And based on glowing economic reports which portray

all of Niagara as a great, prosperous, economic success, that's working just fine. So we just need more of it. More attractions! Rock climbing! Horseback riding!

But for a small example of OPRHP's failing stewardship: they talk about "extending the season," but routinely fence off Terrapin Point in winter, one of the most important Falls viewing spots, making it off-limits. Tourists might drive hundreds of miles for a winter visit, but find themselves arrested if they disobey the "No Trespassing" signs. We get great media coverage of our winter wonderland—but arrest the resulting visitors. How's that "Up close & Powerful" slogan working for us?

Admittedly, the area is dangerous, if neglected--so we suggest that OPRHP start at the beginning of the winter season by shoveling snow, snow-blowing, spreading enviro-friendly ice melting material, grit, etc.—whatever it takes—to keep this viewing area open. We regular people do this every winter with our sidewalks and driveways. OPRHP, spending millions on questionable "projects," and taking in millions, finds shoveling snow impossible?

For those interested in an additional marketing possibility for Niagara Falls and the region, which would encourage visitors to stay longer, that is, to genuinely extend the season (and this would be for a new population of tourists not previously marketed), the Niagara Heritage Partnership (NHP) suggests again, as it has been suggesting for well over a decade, that ecotourism be investigated. That the Niagara River and its shorelines have been designated as a Globally Significant Important Bird Area should be foundational.

Related to the new NTCC contract soon to be agreed upon, there seems to be a slim hope that, at long last, a new idea for promoting Niagara tourism may be considered: ecotourism. NTCC president John Percy has said that as part of the new contract, NTCC will "pay for a consultant to prepare a report to analyze areas of possible improvement in what Niagara County offers to visitors." Additionally, County Legislator Richard E. Updegrave says "We want to identify how to keep people here longer."

Both Percy and Updegrave should be pleased that a consultant has already done such analysis and identification. The EDR study, completed in 2012, concluded there is high potential for regional economic growth—via gorge rim restoration and ecotourism. This \$140,000 study was funded by the Niagara River Greenway Commission and the City of Niagara Falls.

NHP has provided basic information about Niagara ecotourism, facts that could be used in promotional material, how ecotourism could revitalize and extend the season here, and other suggestions about organizations that could help to develop a direct marketing, advertising campaign for the mid-range ecotourist. We believe a couple of grad students with an interest in the environment, and training in advertising could, in a month or two, gather a great deal more information and create the initial promotional material, hard copy and digital, to be used in such a campaign. (Note: the grad students referred to above would be unaffiliated individuals, unlike the recent group, whose fractured

perceptions of the gorge rim and bias pre-determined their commercial-development conclusions.)

Some of the NHP information is posted at www.niagaraheritage.org under the following titles: "Ecotourism Best Way to Extend Tourism Season for Niagara," "New Tourism Efforts Should Focus on Parkway Removal," and "Time for Senator Maziarz to Step Up on Parkway Removal." Additionally, the Frederick Law Olmsted plan for the parks of Niagara, which strongly favors natural scenery, hence landscapes that encourage ecotourism, is also posted there, under "Historical Documents."

The NHP challenges Mark Thomas to read the Olmsted plan and to explain how the stewardship of State Parks has honored it. If he takes his marching orders from Albany, that's one thing; he can then take refuge in, "I'm only following orders." Then we can turn our attention to Commissioner Harvey. We're in an accelerated process of losing the distinctive character of our parks at the Falls—we should at least know to whom we should be directing our concerns.

NHP believes Percy might welcome a campaign to promote a regional approach to a vital, self-sustaining Niagara for ecotourists—year-around appeal to all those who appreciate the natural world. The "Rebranding WNY" endorsed by the Buffalo News should provide additional support. At least part of the \$300,000 grant from the WNY Regional Economic Development Council, comprised of various tourism agencies cooperating to "try to figure out how to market the entire region," should be invested in exploring this concept. State Parks offers a host of guided tours that could be easily incorporated into such a package. With all of the interest in local schools and colleges in "tourism" and the "hospitality industry," and so on, presenting the NTCC with the necessary information should be the first priority.

In the meantime, OPRHP should stop actions that detract from the Olmsted philosophy: they should instruct their three-quarters-of-million-dollar "scoping" team to break their years-long silence and to come out in favor of total gorge rim restoration that would encourage ecotourism, discarding schemes for parkway "reconfiguration" that oppose it (removal only to Findlay is a copout and they know it); they can take action to remove their maintenance garage from the valuable gorge rim property and to restore that area to parkland; they can desist from encouraging further building and commercial activities in Niagara parkland: hotels at DeVeaux Woods State Park; a new State Police building constructed on the gorge rim; zip lining in mature gorge forests.

OPRHP, that is, Rose Harvey and Mark Thomas, can begin publicly endorsing the idea that ecotourism is a worthwhile concept to be pursued, and then promoted, at Niagara. They need to admit that arresting tourists to make them stay longer is not a good idea.

Sincerely,
Bob Baxter
NHP Conservation Chair