

Dear Editor,

In 1997 the Niagara Heritage Partnership proposed that the Niagara gorge parkway be totally removed in the interest of restoring the natural environment that was once part of our heritage along the rim. As might have been predicted, opposition to removal was immediate. What we couldn't have predicted was the nature of the opposition: name calling, misinformation campaigns, political maneuvering, etc. Niagara Heritage Partnership and the growing numbers in support of removal were called "extreme, unwilling to compromise, tree huggers," etc. Of course, the opposition's idea of "compromise" was to keep the parkway--and still is, in some "reconfiguration" or the other--so that was a non-starter.

From very early on, by way of misinformation, the opposition said, "NHP wants to remove the parkway all the way to Youngstown." But we never did and still don't. This lie had legs, however. During the last election cycle, I got a Robo-call informing me that candidate Amy Witryol wanted to remove the parkway, "Youngstown" either mentioned or implied. Of course, she's never taken a position on the parkway issue, one way or the other, but why let facts get in the way of running a campaign?

At another time over the years since 1997, Senator Maziarz and Assemblyman Cerreto, helped by Professor Angus (and his students) at Niagara University initiated a bogus trolley-on-the-parkway "study." The idea was to make this enterprise look so favorable that the proposal for parkway removal would be squashed. That failed when we pointed out what a scam the "study" was--and we've heard nothing more about it. Documents related to this issue are posted on the NHP web site. We're still waiting for the final "study" results and to find out how the money for the "study" was spent. Was Angus paid? Niagara University? Were thousands spent on photocopying student essays?

When the removal proposal had gained enough momentum to request funding from the Niagara River Greenway Commission for a scientific study, Maziarz and Richard Soluri, former Lewiston Mayor, showed up unannounced at the Standing Committee meeting where they both spoke at length against the funding being granted. This was very unusual, unprecedented--I'm unaware of politicians attending such a meeting before or since. (The funding wasn't granted at that time; a subsequent request was successful.) Minutes after the meeting adjourned, Maziarz looked me in the face and said he had not spoken against the funding. Which was I to believe--him or my lying ears? I remember specifically some of what he said that day: "What about my studies?" he'd asked the Committee members, petulantly. "I know they're not scientific, but everyone I ask wants to keep the parkway." That he'd confused the idea of a study with a personal, biased survey didn't appear to occur to him. These are but a few examples from dozens of opposing tactics. I'm not complaining, just revealing.

In the following paragraphs are the outlines of the gorge parkway removal argument as accurately as I can present them. The Niagara Heritage Partnership remains strongly in favor of total gorge parkway removal--more strongly, in fact, than we were in 1997, soon to be 16 years ago--as more evidence supporting removal has accumulated over time.

WHAT WE STILL PROPOSE: the total removal of all four lanes of the gorge parkway between Niagara Falls and Lewiston NY, and the restoration of the natural environment along the gorge rim, graced by a walking and a bicycling trail.

WHY? Establishing this natural park, so closely linked to the natural wonder of the falls, will serve as a focal point for promoting our region to mid-range eco-tourists, a potential for economic growth that other areas of the country have already demonstrated to be richly rewarding. (We've documented this and the evidence is widely available online, as well.)

WHO SUPPORTS THIS PROPOSAL? Thousands of individuals and about 80 organizations (with a combined membership near a million), including the NF City Council, the NF Tourism Advisory Board, NF Business & Professional Associations, and so on. The list is available for viewing on the NHP web site: www.niagaraheritage.org (We have an additional 2000 + individual signatures on paper that do not show online.)

WHO OPPOSES IT? Generally, the "North towns," i.e., Lewiston, Youngstown, Fort Niagara, et al. This includes political figures previously mentioned who may consider themselves to be representing their constituents: former Lewiston Mayor Soluri, Assemblyman John Ceretto, Senator George Maziarz, others.

WHY? Because they are uninformed, generally speaking; they've made a variety of arguments in opposition over the years, all of which have been debunked by scientific study and common sense. The scientific study, by EDR, recently released, has concluded that:

- 1) The potential for regional economic growth via eco-tourism exists.
- 2) Alternative routes could easily handle the traffic currently using the parkway should it be removed. (The parkway is "grossly underutilized.")
 - 2a) The time added to commuting from Lewiston to Niagara Falls (without the parkway) would be under five minutes.
- 3) The cost of removal is reasonable (3.8 million).
- 4) Funding is available to accomplish the task.

Their current opposition argument is that the gorge parkway is crucial to the north towns as their economic lifeline: it is the route tourists and others use to reach them. (Absolutely no evidence is presented in support of this claim. It is their "feeling.") By implication this argument suggests that without the gorge parkway tourists and others would be unable to go to Lewiston, to Fort Niagara, and so on.

We believe this argument is just plain silly. There's only one entrance to the parkway that can be readily accessed by tourists in the first place, and the idea that tour busses, vans, etc, wouldn't quickly chose an alternate route to the Fort defies common sense.

WHAT ABOUT COMPROMISE?

Yes, this is worth discussion, although some of the benefits of total, full-length removal would be lost (such as the greenhouse proposed for the lanes currently crossing the power plant). Removing only the portion from downtown Niagara Falls to the City line at Devil's Hole is a worthwhile compromise that could retain the heart of the proposal.

WHAT ABOUT REMOVAL FROM DOWNTOWN TO FINDLAY DRIVE?

This idea is worthless, unacceptable if we want to realize the benefits of regional economic growth via eco-tourism as originally proposed. Those who state they are "in favor" of this, pretending it is a "compromise" position, are either ignorant about the vision of the original proposal, do not sufficiently value the natural environment, or simply do not care about the regional benefits restoration would provide. They choose to maintain a commuter route at the expense of a wonderfully restored gorge rim park. But eco-tourists would be unconvinced that hiking alongside a commuter road is a "nature" experience they'd like to enjoy with their families--and so this choice would effectively destroy the original idea.

EDR was aware of the fact that the stretch of the gorge rim between Findlay Drive and the City line at Devil's Hole is the most environmentally significant, so essential to the vision of natural restoration, that they concluded, and recommended, that it be the first section removed.

POSTSCRIPT:

OPRHP might be considered in opposition to removal, as well. State Parks has spent over three quarters of a million creating six possible "treatments" of the gorge rim (options), of which one is total removal--but over a year later has failed to present, as they promised to do, the two to three options selected for further study--and has currently installed new pavement on a southern portion of the gorge parkway.

It is the New Year's wish of NHP that those in opposition to parkway removal recognize their wrong-headed thinking, that they decide to be rational: the parkway needs to go. (This is essentially a shovel-ready project that could put hundreds to work.) May they find the courage to stand for the vision that will restore our gorge-rim legacy for the generations to follow us. Lacking such insight and courage, if they still find themselves incapable of supporting removal, then at the very least, perhaps they'll stop making things up about the NHP proposal.

Sincerely,
Bob Baxter
NHP Conservation Chair