

Endless Echo of False Claims Distorts Parkway Debate

Many years ago I worked at International Graphite on Packard Road, a factory that no longer exists. My job title was "Inspector," but I was a laborer like most everyone else, except the machinists. It was a dirty, low paying job, but I was happy to have it. We had a Union Steward there, Eddie, who carried a soiled, dog-eared copy of the Union Contract in his shirt pocket. He was the one who argued our grievances against the company. When he came out of the meeting room with a little smile on his carbon-smearred face, we knew he'd won. "How'd you do that, Eddie?" we'd ask. And once he said, "I just go in there and say what I have to say. When they start to talk, I say over and over to myself in my head, 'When that noise stops, I'll repeat what I already said.'" He won a fair number of grievances for us using that technique. I liked Eddie, a good guy who worked as hard as any of us on the floor, but that was over fifty years ago, and his technique would be laughed out of the room today. It's still being used, however, by the opponents of gorge parkway removal. Here are some examples.

"There's no money." Well, there is money. The Niagara River Greenway is funded nine million a year for the next forty-seven years. Three million per year of that is handed to State Parks every one of those years. Removing the gorge parkway meets every one of the criteria of a genuine greenway project. All it would take is cooperation from people who perhaps haven't done that before. They ought to try it; they might like the feeling. Who knows what great things could be accomplished working together? There's also the possibility of Niagara Heritage Area money, somewhere near ten million. Leaders working together could free some of this up. If that, and the Greenway money isn't enough, try this: the current maintenance costs for the gorge parkway would equal removal costs in about seven years. This does not take into account the tens of millions that would be saved when the parkway will need replacement which, if kept, it will eventually need. The Niagara Heritage Partnership (NHP) has made these arguments before. Is simple arithmetic beyond the opponents of removal? Removal opponents: please stop repeating and repeating that there is no money.

The "Preserve DeVeaux" group argues parkway removal will increase traffic through DeVeaux, threatening the safety of residents and school children. Warning: the response to this argument involves arithmetic again. If every car currently commuting on the parkway were instead to drive through DeVeaux on Lewiston Road, and this number were added to the number of vehicles already using Lewiston Road, and that number were then multiplied by two, the total would still be thousands short of the number of that now drives past Hyde Park School on the Boulevard, about 14,000. Further, similar road removal projects elsewhere in the country indicate that displaced traffic fans out to take multiple alternate routes. "Preserve DeVeaux" refuses to acknowledge alternate routes exist here. They merely repeat their argument, and repeat, and repeat, like good old Eddie. Advice to them: Look at a map.

The Findlay "Compromise" argument. The NHP proposes total removal of the gorge parkway--and one of the reasons is that traffic would no longer be able to detour the City of Niagara Falls. This would enhance the potential of the business districts.

Removal of the parkway from downtown only to Findlay and keeping lanes open from there would maintain the detour. Commuters and others would simply use Whirlpool from downtown and the parkway from Findlay. That's not a "compromise"; that's ignorant nonsense. If you support total removal for business reasons and someone tells you, "Listen, removal to Findlay is a great compromise," what you're really being told is that person thinks you're a fool. The idea is an insult. What the City of Niagara Falls should say: "Okay, we support your Findlay idea. But here's what we're going to do. Unless all four lanes of the parkway are removed to the City line at Devil's Hole, we're going to make Whirlpool a dead end at Findlay." How long do you think it would take the "Findlay compromise" people to start screaming? There are over twenty miles of Robert Moses Parkway. NHP is proposing the removal of about five. (about three to the city line.) That's a compromise.

Removal opponents also keep repeating: "If the parkway's removed, handicapped and wheelchair users won't have access to the gorge rim." This isn't true. The NHP proposal provides as much and more of the access currently available. "NHP wants to remove the parkway between Lewiston and Youngstown." This isn't true, either, never was, and won't be. Some say there's a secret "third group" advocating for this, but that seems an odd way to promote something. In our view that's a disingenuous fiction, used to justify spreading the propaganda.

The NHP proposal for total removal includes the ecological restoration of the gorge rim--this new natural park would be the focal point for ecotourists who would then be introduced to what the rest of the region offers by way of hiking, bicycling, bird watching, nature photography, and so on. These are visitors who would be more likely to stay four or five days, not four or five hours, whose organizations might be interested in having their annual conferences here. Unless you can speak with authority about the natural areas of our region, about the varieties of warblers, for example, that pass through our area spring and fall, some from places as distant as Peru, about the large concentrations and varieties of gulls in the lower river each winter, about what waterfowl might be sighted in other areas, the American Eagle reestablishing a presence here--and know the relationship between these and economic benefits, given a high octane promotional campaign--then chances are your opinion is generally worthless. It's time for you to stop frowning and looking puzzled and shaking your head "no" when confronted with the word "ecotourism." You may think the word is from a language spoken nowhere on earth, but you are wrong. Other communities have reaped economic benefits from ecotourism. Don't you think the potential for us to do the same should be investigated? If you don't, then you are choosing to remain ignorant, and to make decisions based on your ignorance, perhaps for the entire region, because you don't know what ecotourism means.

Thousands of people, perhaps hundreds of thousands (counting organizational memberships) have already told us what they want to see here--and that is an ecologically restored gorge rim with parkway lanes totally removed. Thousands of names are on the online petition at www.niagaraheritage.org. Organizations in support of total removal are also listed there. Removal opponents say "those people aren't from around here," as if that's a legitimate criticism. It's true enough, though, many of them

are not "from around here." Many of the nine million tourists who visit us each summer "aren't from around here," either. That's why we call them tourists. Do you think those who signed on in support of total removal would be satisfied hiking and bicycling alongside a "Findlay compromise," two lanes of commuter traffic? No reasonable person would, and yet perceptions are so confused that someone stood up at a "scoping" meeting and mentioned Frederick Law Olmsted and Robert Moses in the same praiseworthy sentence, as if they had compatible visions for Niagara. It's tough to imagine a more antithetical couple...well, maybe: Gandhi and Hitler? Martin Luther King and Pol Pot? You get the idea. For those opposing removal: please go to the NHP website to read the "No Compromise" remarks and to consider the ideas for a high-end tourist map for the region, benefiting all the outlying towns and villages. These and amplifications of some of the arguments made here can be found under Recent Postings. If you are going to oppose something, you should at least have a vague notion of what it is you are opposing. And please, also, consider not repeating feeble and unsupported arguments that have already been refuted--the mere repetition of a false statement, no matter how many times you do it, won't make it true.

Bob Baxter
NHP Conservation Chair