

Meaningful Dialogue, Not

Gentlemen of the Editorial Board--

When I sorted out what transpired at the meeting (18 Nov 2014) where our mutual goal was to engage in "meaningful dialogue," I was forced to conclude it was deeply disappointing--we failed to achieve anything that could be described that way. There's the possibility that the topic is too complex to permit such discussion in a limited time. But there's also the possibility that board members were unprepared for such discussion, and made no attempt to be prepared, in which case reasonable people might see that behavior, intentional or otherwise, as insulting.

For example: not one reference was made to the specifics of any of the documents to which I'd referred in correspondence prior to the meeting; a reading of the letter written to Assemblyman Ceretto would have provided additional guidance to documents posted on the Niagara Heritage Partnership website--but not one reference was made to any of the specific content there, either.

The meeting time was spent in two ways: 1) with me attempting to explain the fundamentals of the NHP removal proposal or responding to questions the answers to which should have been known to board members before I arrived, and 2) with board members expressing their feelings about the necessity of the parkway to access Lewiston restaurants--extolling the ease with which these restaurants could be accessed for out-of-town visitors, friends and family members.

With regard to the potential benefits of regional ecotourism to be derived from gorge parkway removal (and for the purpose of our discussions this meant removal to the City line at Devil's Hole) there were two possibilities: 1) the board members did not in any genuine sense appreciate that vision, or 2) board members fully understand the concept, but reject it, because it has only potential, in favor of retaining easy access to Lewiston via the parkway. Note: because two of the four board members present did most of the talking, and the other two essentially didn't speak to challenge, or at all, I took that as those who did talk were speaking for the board. This might be unfair.

What follows are the main remarks made by board members, brackets added to provide context, as accurately as possible without a recording:

"Lewiston's got a lot going for it."

"When I have friends or family visit from out of town {I} want to take them to a restaurant in Lewiston. If I couldn't take them straight there on the parkway there's the {'danger,' 'possibility'...didn't get this word} I'd take them elsewhere."

"Don't minimize an extra seven minutes travel time. {required for an alternate route if the parkway were removed}. If that's the case, I'd just as soon take {visitors} to NF Blvd." {the speaker might have meant Military Road here}

"If we have to blow up a bridge {the parkway Whirlpool overpass} and rip out a road because maybe someone might open a restaurant on Main Street {Niagara Falls}, I'd just as soon leave things the way they are." {the gorge parkway intact}
{This remark acknowledges the parkway detours traffic around the business districts of Niagara Falls, and takes a position regarding that.}

Not one mention was made of Niagara Falls restaurants (it was as if they didn't exist, and thus the necessity to go to Lewiston). Even I (as a non-restaurant goer) could name the Como, Fortuna's, Michael's, La Hacienda, The Wine Bar. Are these for some reason unacceptable for those visitors, those family and friends from out of town?

No comment was made about the desirability of restored natural landscapes along a gorge rim park resulting from parkway removal, no comment about the greenhouse idea. When I mentioned that the Sierra Club, among 80 plus other organizations, had endorsed parkway removal, this was dismissed as essentially meaningless, ie, "Similar to Unions endorsing a political candidate." No response was made to my mentioning that the Niagara River and its shorelines had been designated a Globally Significant Important Bird Area.

I wonder what an objective observer would have concluded about all of this--of the editorial board members of *Niagara Gazette* who seem to feel no loyalty or obligation to promote businesses (restaurants) of Niagara Falls--of the almost indignant assumption that of course we take visitors to Lewiston restaurants and of course we expect the parkway to continue to exist so that this is easily accomplished...and of the implication that yes, the board understands the potential regional economic growth if the parkway were removed and all the work done, jobs provided, with natural restoration, promoting, etc., but it rejects that idea because it believes the parkway should be available for speedy trips to and from Lewiston--for the infrequent visits of out-of-town friends or family members. Sadly, that's very close to the impression I got, myself.

A further note: the original "swipe" I took at *Niagara Gazette* writers, complaining that a misperception was being propagated--the "shabby" state parks myth--was never acknowledged as an error. And btw, which editorial board member(s) wrote the editorial in which that error was repeated? I'm curious to know who thought the Cerreto wisdom of "better times are coming" was worth echoing in the conclusion.

Please know that I take no pleasure in being critical of the editorial board in this instance. The *Niagara Gazette* is my paper--I've subscribed for as long as I've had an address in the county, the late sixties, and in the first year of my teens had a Sunday paper route of 120+ delivered from a wagon, with my ten-year-old sister often helping, roller skating copies to milk boxes at the side entrances of homes along Michigan, Linwood and South Avenues. The year before that I helped an older boy with his daily route--bundles of papers were dumped off the truck in front of McGrath & Durk's hardware store in the 1300 block of Linwood Avenue.

In light of the above, you might appreciate why the disappointment I experience over the *N Gazette* failing to grasp to significance of total north parkway removal, its failure to deal with it (take a position strongly supporting total removal according to the evidence), is especially sharp. But editorial board members gave little or no indication they're aware of the evidence, even in its broad sweep, let alone grasping the full negative impact of the half-baked "removal to Findlay" decision.

I'll live with the disappointment; the one entity from which I expected an objective and rational investigation and assessment of the issue has dropped the ball. When all's said and done, it's a pretty big ball, tough to handle, involving the Niagara River Greenway Commission, OPRHP, NYPA, the vested interests of municipalities, politicians, etc, etc. You get in the way, it could roll right over you. I'll accept the miracle that the small crew of the *Niagara Gazette* manages to publish day after day--and that's no small thing. Thanks for that. So: no meaningful dialogue, but a learning experience for me, nevertheless.

Btw, of all the arguments for retaining the gorge parkway I've heard in nearly 18 years of NHP advocacy, the "Lewiston-Restaurant-Rationale" is by far the most pathetic.

Sincerely,
Bob Baxter
NHP Conservation Chair