

Total Niagara Gorge Parkway Removal: The Reasonable Choice

The issue of whether to remove or to retain some variation of the Niagara gorge parkway should now be settled, clear in everyone's mind, with total removal being the obvious best choice. And yet those few who insist it should be kept, at least in some contorted "reconfiguration," continue to resist total removal. Beyond an imagined personal convenience that assumes more importance than what's best for the region, why is this?

What we know of the EDR study (the only genuine study of the entire gorge rim and the related issues that's ever been done) has provided us with the following conclusions: total removal is not only affordable, but recommended, and doing so would save tens of millions in years to come in annual maintenance costs and eventual replacement; existing roads would not be overburdened with excess traffic; the natural restoration of the gorge rim, this creation of this new park, can translate into economic gain for the region via ecotourism as the major driving force. This study concluded and recommended that the most environmentally valuable portion of the rim that needs to be restored first is that stretch between Findlay Drive and the City line at Devil's Hole.

The notion that the parkway should be removed only from downtown Niagara Falls to Findlay, partially based on a scheme nearly a quarter century old that never made sense in the first place, environmentally or economically, was ignored as nonsense. (Of course, the economic part might work in a limited way--if we are willing to turn the gorge rim and gorge into an amusement park.) But if one of the benefits of removal is to prevent traffic from detouring around the business districts of the City, especially Main Street, removal to Findlay won't do it.

In 1992 Sasaki & Associates, assisted by Halcyon Ltd., produced what was called the Niagara Waterfront Master Plan. A quick scan of the Sasaki scheme for the gorge rim reveals hopelessly wrong-headed thinking even for 20 years ago. There is language in the plan that acknowledges the importance of the natural environment, even mentioning "stewardship" and "Olmsted." But aside from these "required" recognitions, our natural heritage is generally ignored or subjected to further damage in its planning: "clusters" of non-native, ornamental, flowering trees are to be planted along the rim for their "color and fragrance," selective native tree removal is recommended to "frame views," a mechanical, vertical tram is to transport crowds down into the gorge near Whirlpool Bridge, with accompanying restaurant & gift shop; the gorge parkway is retained to carry a monorail trolley to ArtPark (and also to Canada over the Rainbow Bridge); the now absent Wintergarden, and Convention Center (now the casino) figure prominently into economic revival; a gorge walking trail is to be squeezed into the narrow space behind the current State Parks' maintenance garage, until such time the garage can be replaced with a Visitor's Center, restaurant, gift shop etc. Nationwide, these kinds of misguided perspectives led Todd Gitlin to write, a year later: "We live in a culture in which everything that starts out original turns into a theme park." But perhaps the above represents "wonderful" plans for

those who wish to retain the parkway as a commuter route, and that is why they are still talking.

The Comprehensive Plan for the City of Niagara Falls, USA, released in 2004, lists "Reconnect the city to its waterfront" as number one, under "Big Moves." Unfortunately, the language dealing with the issue is vague, mentioning "removal" as a possibility only once in passing and concentrating instead on words such as "reconfiguration." It's time for the Plan to be revisited and updated in this regard--or largely discarded.

More recently, State Parks has created via "public input" a total of six options re: possible outcomes for the gorge parkway, one of which is total removal. These options are jumbled together in a hat somewhere, waiting for several to be drawn out, perhaps with price tags attached. Five of these choices, retaining some convoluted version of the parkway, have avoided being influenced by ideas of stewardship, or by the Olmsted vision for the stunning natural landscapes of Niagara.

The current grassroots advocacy for total gorge parkway removal, starting in 1997 with the Niagara Heritage Partnership, has contributed to this dialogue, and it's the feeling of the membership that this has been a significant contribution. Over 80 groups and 4,000 individuals support total removal, etc, (check www.niagaraheritage.org); the Wild Ones Niagara Falls and River Region Chapter moved through the Niagara River Greenway Commission to engage the services of EDR, which resulted in the only definitive study of the issue (Regional Economic Growth Through Ecological Restoration of the Niagara Gorge Rim); recognition far beyond the local scene has been noted: Google the commentary specific to our issue written by the Preservation Institute titled "Removing Freeways--Restoring Cities."

The grassroots, thousands of us, have done our job. What remains is for the City of Niagara Falls (note: the City Council and the Tourism Advisory Board have already endorsed total removal), the Niagara Tourism and Convention Corporation, the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, the New York Power Authority, Niagara University, the Niagara Falls National Heritage Area Commission, and other public agencies and political leaders to pick up the torch and to carry it forward with enthusiasm and vigor toward total gorge parkway removal and the creation of a striking gorge rim park that will be the gold standard of restoration for centuries to come. If ever a project announced it was "shovel-ready," this is it. The time for talking about anything other than total removal is over. Now's the time for action--for all of us to pull together and to get this done for our region.

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