

[DRAFT] Proposal To the Cobourg Council

Title: **A Natural Heritage Waterfront Park**

From: The Advisory Committee on Natural Spaces of the Willow Beach Field Naturalists
October xx, 2019

The purpose of this proposal is to ask Council to create a **Natural Heritage Waterfront Park** comprising **the West Harbour (the water west of the Centre Pier Area and a line connecting the Centre Pier to the west lighthouse, and the shore west the north end of the Centre Pier, though we might choose to exclude the strip in front of Yacht Club between the Centre Pier and the boat launch), the West Headland, the Ecology Garden, and the West Beach** in order to give them **permanent protection**.

The PMP (Parks Master Plan) **already proposes** that the “West Beach Lands & Boardwalk” and the “Ecology Garden” be reclassified as nature parks (p. 27). The WUNA (Waterfront User Needs Assessment) recommends that we “Preserve the Headland and West Beach as a naturalized area” (Recommendations for West Beach and Headland, p. 37).

We are proposing to include the west harbour, which would make one unified natural heritage park of all these contiguous properties.

The PMP says that the focus of “nature parks” (natural is a better word) is conservation, nature appreciation, and interpretation. These parks provide **a nature-based experience and environmentally compatible passive recreation activities** [my bolding] (26). These activities would include sailing, canoeing, kayaking, dragon-boating, fishing, walking, running, nature hiking, dog-walking, birding, picnicking, photography, painting, and sitting on benches enjoying the view. A **passive-use** park would be utterly compatible with the uses and activities listed by the residents of Cobourg in response to the community survey carried out by the PMP (see chart, p. 9), such as walking (63% of users), nature hiking (48%), nature observation/bird watching (37%), picnicking (36%), dog-walking (32%), canoeing/kayaking (31%), boating/sailing (26%), running/jogging (21%).

This new park would be designed to answer all the objectives of Goal #4 of the PMP – Environment (p. 15):

- Maintain and preserve natural ecosystems and their functions
- Develop parks to enhance environmental integrity, productivity and diversity
- Protect riparian resources and enhance aquatic habitat
- Enhance appreciation and understanding of the environment through accommodating public access and providing interpretation/educational opportunities

5 points to keep in mind:

1. This proposal is totally in the spirit of the Parks Master Plan of 2013, which recommended that “Cobourg should expand its supply of parks” (p. i), and which gave priority to waterfront design (p. ii).
2. It reflects many recommendations of the Waterfront User Needs Assessment of 2018.
3. It has an unprecedented level of Community support.
4. The immediate cost is **nil** and long-range costs are comparatively low; as the PMP points out, low maintenance is characteristic of such parks (p. 27 top).
5. In terms of climate change and sustainability, creating a downtown, **passive-use area with zero greenhouse gas emissions** makes excellent sense. You could not have a greener proposal.

The **natural value** of the area is almost undisputed - see the PMP and WUNA, especially Appendix H “Natural Heritage Report,” p. 371 ff by Brad Bricker of Landscape Ecology and Natural heritage Planning.

Its importance for birds (over **268 species** of birds recorded around the harbor) and plants (the West Headland and West Beach have 248 plant species, including some unusual ones like Seaside Spurge) is legendary and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry identifies the West Beach as the **Cobourg Beach Life Science Site**.

Birds need **protected open water** and our harbour is the best spot between Oshawa and Presqu’ile, a great spot for wintering gulls (15 species), Snowy Owls, and waterfowl and a **migration** hotspot in Spring and Fall.

Many rarities recorded (see Bain, M., *The Wildlife of Cobourg Harbour* (2015)).

The West Beach is the best unspoiled wormwood and willow beach between Toronto and Presqu’ile.

The great **cultural heritage value** of the area must also not be overlooked and undervalued: the West Headland was built shortly after Victoria Hall (opened 1860, pier built in 1870s and opened 1876). The harbour is officially called our “Heritage Harbour.” This new park should be protected under the Ontario Heritage Act as a landscape of great cultural value.

Opposition will only be to the inclusion of the West Harbour, since this precludes Marina expansion into the area, an idea still dear to a dwindling few.

Jurisdiction issue: When the Planning Committee considered the proposal in 2016, they were told by staff members that the Town did not have the jurisdiction to protect the West Harbour because it formerly belonged to the Federal government. This is a red herring. The Town can protect the area if it wishes.

Nor does including the West Harbour in a park preclude the necessary dredging, the building of a disabled access dock, or even the acquisition of a boatlift if placed east of current launch or in the Marina where it would make sense.

Cobourg is **phenomenally lucky** to have in its downtown core a discrete area like the West Harbour, West Headland, Ecology Garden, and West Beach. Other towns would die for this **greenspace**.

Even the OP (though little attention has been paid to it) classifies it as under **Environmental Constraint**.

But the area is **fragile** – the West Headland was badly damaged almost overnight in 2014, and the West Beach could be ruined by a bulldozer in half a day.

This is why we are asking for **protection now**; we want something left to enhance when the Town is ready. The specifics can be worked out later.

The Legion ownership of the north strip of the Ecology Garden can be resolved.

Nor should the School Board ownership of a section of the boardwalk be allowed to prevent the Town from creating a park.

We are asking only for protection now, not money (we recognize that fixing the East Pier is more pressing).

First proposal from WBFN recommending the harbor area be preserved as an open space” similar to the landfill parks in TO and all over the province was written by Clive Goodwin in August 1994 – 25 years ago.

I made a proposal in January 2016, which the then mayor said was to be a priority item, and the Parks and Recreation Committee fully approved. Obviously nothing happened.

This proposal has already been vetted by 5 committees. Ontario’s provincial environmental conservation organization, **Ontario Nature**, fully supports the idea.

Time to act

Recommendation for Action:

1. That Council move to initiate the creation of this Natural Heritage Waterfront Park.
2. That Council ask the Parks and Recreation Committee working together with appropriate staff to formulate a detailed proposal for the rules and regulations of such a park, including the things that need to be done over time to make this park into the potential jewel it can be and a timetable for undertaking the improvements.

Appended Materials:

Photos

Bricker Report, Plan B Natural Heritage Report

Bain, M., *The Wildlife of Cobourg Harbour* (2015).

Bird List

Plant List

Ontario Nature Letter (to be solicited)

Committee Reports

Legal Report