

Rethinking the Niagara Frontier



A report on the bi-national forum

March 30 & 31, 2000

Two Countries – One Region

If we were to stop thinking about the Niagara River as a boundary that divides two nations and start thinking of it as the center of one bi-national region, what would we think about?

And if we were to think about this bi-national region as one of the world's most attractive places to live, as well as one of its most popular visitor destinations, what would we do?

These were the kind of questions 75 Americans and Canadians considered at the Rethinking the Niagara Frontier forum held in Niagara Falls, NY and Niagara Falls, Ontario, March 30 and 31.

The forum featured small group discussions on heritage and cultural tourism; trade and transportation; brownfield redevelopment; the natural and built environment; and knowledge-based industries.

The sessions opened with expert presentations about what is already happening in the region and what might be possible.

The Jewel of the Region

Brian Merrett, chair of Ontario's Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) led with a review of ongoing development of park properties that are the leading attraction of the region. Merrett called Niagara Falls and the park the "catalyst for tourism and stimulant for economic growth."

Visitation to the Falls is growing rapidly and has increased 23% over the last



The "heritage corridor" framework promotes a wide range of historical, cultural, architectural, natural, and other attractions for visitors and local economies, alike.

three years. By 2002 it is expected 20 million people will visit annually. One study estimated 25,000 new jobs on the Canadian side alone by 2003.

Merrett said the Parks Commission faces the challenge of developing new attractions that will bring tourists and economic success

while preserving the quality of parklands. The "greening" of NPC assets has begun with new off-site bus parking, recycling, and composting.

Other major projects include a people mover to connect visitors to a range of destinations and to ease traffic, parking, and pollution problems in the park; an

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Thanks

Rethinking the Niagara Frontier was made possible by the generous contributions of the United States Environmental Protection Agency; Environment Canada, the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation, and the Niagara Parks Commission.

The bi-national forum was organized by the Waterfront Regeneration Trust of Toronto, Ontario, and the Urban Design Project at the University of Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning.



"We are citizens of a bi-national community—the Niagara River with all its majesty and power is a force that unites rather than divides us."

Bill Connor, CEO
Niagara Economic
and Tourism
Corporation



expansive new golf complex at Chippawa; reuse of old power buildings in Victoria Park; and a new marina upriver.

Six Billion Dollars Being Invested

Robert C. O'Dell, an economist and planner who has consulted for the Niagara Economic and Tourism Corporation (NET Corp.), outlined roughly six billion dollars (Cdn) of current or planned investment in visitor attractions and related infrastructure on the Ontario side of the River.

These investments, O'Dell said, are part of a bigger strategy for economic development in Ontario's Niagara Region. NET Corp., a private organization designated by the regional government to organize development strategy and action for the region, has identified five priority areas for investment: tourism; telecommunications-dependent sectors such as call centers, data processing, and distance learning; high-tech manufacturing; specialized agriculture; and adult lifestyle communities.

A Platform for Collaboration

Mary Means, a noted US planner, and an expert on cultural heritage corridors, talked about the heritage corridor concept as a platform for boundary-crossing collaboration in dozens of settings.

Many regions around the United States have used the "heritage corridor" framework to develop, interpret, link, and promote a wide range of historical, cultural, architectural, natural, and other attractions for the benefit of visitors and local economies, alike.

The key, Means said, is to connect a variety of individual attractions to make a comprehensive regional destination; in short, to make the whole much more than the sum of its parts. In this regard, the Niagara Falls region has a strategic advantage over other places, even before considering the Falls itself.

Beyond the immediate benefits, heritage corridor development has provided a non-threatening point of entry into the otherwise difficult work of multi-jurisdictional cooperation, not only accomplishing a useful task, but also laying the organizational groundwork for other



bi-national planning and development initiatives. New England's Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Area, is an example of communities working together to tell the story of the region, create new recreational opportunities, assist the regeneration of the River and manage the pressures of contemporary development.

The Border as an Asset

John Farrow, President of the Canadian Urban Institute, described some of his recent work about "successful city-regions." Farrow suggested that in order to seize the opportunities for the Niagara region, we need to stop focusing on the border and start looking at a region that encompasses two jurisdictions.

The region's conventional assets are significant. Toronto-Buffalo-Rochester is the fourth largest urban region in North America and the second fastest growing. It has a world class attraction in the Falls, and an international "brand name" in Niagara Falls. Geography is a funnel for economic activity – whatever goes between Ontario and the Eastern US must come through this region.

But the region also has some unconventional assets. Farrow urged the group to see the differences between US and Canada in tax and regulatory regimes, educational and medical systems, wage rates and skill packages as opportunities rather than burdens.

"If we create a region that crosses the border, we begin to create the type of tension that, if used properly, leads to the type of innovations that create value and wealth. The goal is to be world competitive, to be world class."

The forum was planned and organized in cooperation with attendee organizations including: Allee King Rosen & Fleming, Inc.; Arts Council in Buffalo and Erie County; The Baird Foundation; Brock University; Clinton Brown Co. Architecture; BorderNet Alliance; Buffalo Economic Renaissance Corporation; Buffalo Green Fund; Buffalo Niagara Enterprise; Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy; Buffalo Place Inc.; Burk & Associates Ltd.; Canada Information Office; Canadian Consulate General; Canadian Urban Institute; Carter International; Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo; Empire State Development Corp.; Erie County; cont'd.....

Defining Opportunities, Strategies, Priorities

In the second part of the forum, participants worked in small groups to define strategies for capitalizing on the region's opportunities and set some priorities for immediate action in five topic areas.

Preliminary discussions among initial participants last winter helped set the topic areas based on an evaluation of regional assets, issues, and opportunities.

Below are the highlights. A complete report of the forum will be available on-line soon.



Heritage and Cultural Tourism

Participants agreed the region has a rich and diverse array of heritage and cultural assets – eg. arts, entertainment, architecture, nature, industry, recreation and more – that should be **developed, linked, interpreted, and marketed** as a single destination.

Obstacles to progress identified included lack of coordination in many areas, a lack of political cooperation and consensus, and a lack of popular support, funding, local pride, and local understanding of the region.

The potential **benefits**, however, were clear: more visitors, staying longer, spending more, creating more jobs; an improved quality of life for residents; and a better self-image for the whole region.

Two strategies proposed for pursuing the opportunities were to:

- Create a bi-national organization to include representatives of government, culture, tourism, marketing, education,

corporate, environment and other private sector groups to provide leadership, coordination, and information exchange.

- Conduct an inventory of assets as a first step toward a regional master plan. We need to identify and evaluate sites and possible thematic groupings of attractions. We also need to assess current cross-border marketing efforts, leadership, and information, and to attract funding from various sources.

Other suggested strategies included formation of a bi-national youth leadership group, creation of a regional historical organization, and establishing standards of quality in heritage development.

Trade and Transportation

Participants outlined a range of strategies for fulfilling the region's opportunities in trade and transportation. It was proposed that we:

- **Use technology** more effectively to speed and “pre-clear” the movement of people and goods across the border.

Participants also identified the need to study the “**border business**” drawing on the lessons of other regions where borders play a major role in the movement of goods and people.

- **Coordinate planning** for develop-

ment of a number of transportation corridors; work on them as multi-modal including pedestrian, air, rail, and vehicle; coordinated planning is essential.

It was also proposed that an **inventory of visitor attractions** be developed to help guide new investments in transport facilities.

- **Build a people mover** that will span the river, connecting visitor attractions with visitor accommodations, and linking Niagara Falls New York, Niagara Falls Ontario, Fort Erie and Buffalo. Similar strategies for non-auto, non-truck transportation were outlined.
- **Improve connections.** A range of ideas emerged for re-using old bridges (“Ponte Vecchio” on the old Peace Bridge if a new single span bridge is built; pedestrians on the CP Rail bridge); new bridges (pedestrian or bike crossings from Grand Island to the Ontario side); and re-configuring existing connections (such as the Robert Moses Parkway) for environmentally friendlier uses.



Town of Fort Erie Gateway Development Corp.; Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council; Hodgson Russ Andrews Woods & Goodyear; Institute for Local Governance and Regional Growth; Mary Means Associates; Robert C. O'Dell Management, Inc.; The Office for Lewiston's Economic & Community Development; New Millennium Group of Western New York; New York Power Authority; New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation; County of Niagara; Niagara County Planning; City of Niagara Falls, NY; City of Niagara Falls, Ont.; Niagara Economic & Tourism Corporation; Niagara Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau; Niagara Falls Tourism; Niagara Parks Commission; Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority; Niagara University; cont'd....



Brownfield Redevelopment

There are many parts of the Niagara Region where soil and groundwater quality have been impacted by previous industrial uses. Participants identified the obstacles to reusing these properties and sketched a framework for action for improving their ability to attract investment.

The big picture. Participants saw in the reuse of old industrial lands an opportunity, not only to improve the environment, but to create meaningful new jobs, restore local tax bases, and develop a new sense of place by celebrating local heritage and reconnecting derelict lands to surrounding communities.

Key points: There is a lot of acreage. Much of it is strategically located on waterfronts and served by infrastructure. These sites offer the opportunity to pursue economic, environmental, and community goals simultaneously. The regional economic situation (NAFTA, tourism, recent investments, etc.) offers new potential to trigger action on these sites.

Issues to resolve: “Greenfield” sites are often cheaper to develop because of environmental and related legal issues attached to brownfields. The real estate market in Erie and Niagara counties is weak so there has been little market stimulus for redevelopment. But a comprehensive, visionary

strategy – integrating economy, ecology, and community – could help attract the new capital we need.

The need for defining a **common vision**, creating a **regional plan**, and charting **incremental progress** means that those responsible should:

- **Use and improve tools for regional transformation** – with a plan that integrates economic development, ecological improvement, and community objectives; provides financial incentives such as tax credits, job re-training, ED Zone designations; makes the decision-making process “transparent” and geared to build consensus.
- **Develop demonstration projects to build momentum.** Brownfields are a “canvas for new possibilities.” Frame the vision, make a plan, inventory sites, prioritize innovative ideas for reclamation and reuse, address the legal barriers, coordinate action, and make sure the public is involved in and knows about the successes.



The Natural and Built Environment

Participants saw the opportunity to consider the natural and built environment as related to economic development; to link the environment with cultural heritage and history; to capitalize on tremendous resources, and to “re-imagine” the region.

Others described the opportunity more in terms of the great assets of the region, including the River, the region’s geology, and climate, as well as a host of human-made assets – grain elevators, hydro-electric plants, canals, historic architecture, transportation links, “real cities” and “quaint hamlets.”



- Create a bi-national regional plan. There was strong sentiment that regional planning is a key strategy for improving the natural and built environment. Some participants called for a comprehensive inventory of resources, existing plans, land uses, organizations, jurisdictions, and economic sectors as a means of coordinating efforts. They also emphasized the development of **principles** for a regional plan to emphasize diversity, ecosystem thinking, sustainability, and appropriate development. The plan should work to enhance the region as a **world-class** destination; build on existing assets of **river, parks, and green infrastructure**; and link people, parks and attractions to each other in “**one region**.”

Implementation of a regional greenspace system was viewed as an important way to overcome jurisdictional gridlock. It was also viewed as a context to help *continues on page 5*

“Working across jurisdictional lines—especially international borders—is difficult business. But a consensus project like a heritage tourism corridor can be a proving ground for that kind of cooperation.”

John B. Sheffer, II,
Director
Institute for Local
Governance and
Regional Growth

“The regional approaches we’ve promoted also make sense for solving problems and encouraging development across this unique international community.”

Laurence K. Rubin,
Commissioner of
Environment and
Planning
Erie County

integrate trade and economic development, transportation, heritage preservation and interpretation initiatives, and to involve academic centers including the University at Buffalo, Niagara University, and Brock University.

- **Invest in Niagara Falls, NY.** Participants emphasized investment in the US side of our bi-national city as a key to any regional development strategy. The region can’t be great if Niagara Falls, NY is wanting. Make it the “Destination of the Millennium.”
- **Do what’s do-able.** Some of the problems we face are huge. We need to sort out small and achievable projects and start working on them. That will bring us closer to solving the bigger issues.
- **Re-imagine the region.** By focusing on different images of the region – for example, as a region of organic and specialty agricultural production – we can begin to enlarge the possi-

bilities for the future. Cultural, heritage, and natural assets are all part of this process of re-imagination.

Knowledge Based Industry

Participants in the discussion on knowledge based industry saw the opportunity to make knowledge the key value-adding component of economy and a generator for new job creation.

They suggested using our problems as a resource in the sense that problems help us produce knowledge as we work to solve them. This knowledge, in turn, is marketable to others as products and services.

Pursuing this general strategy would mean working to link universities, corporations, government, and communities in this process. It would also mean making quality of life a key issue — both as a way of drawing and keeping brain-workers, and as something these new industries would help produce.

The proposed next steps were simply to go to work. If we start working on the problems at hand, everything we need to decide about partners, processes, organization, implementation and more, will fall into place.

Included in the proposed strategies for developing knowledge-based industries were:

- Create a “**brownfields institute**” and market ourselves as “the guys who solved Love Canal.”
- Establish a **cross-border university** or an alliance of institutions to begin to organize the knowledge that comes from working on indigenous problems.
- Develop **industry specific** knowledge, such as the knowledge that comes out of the region’s wine-making industry.
- Develop and market knowledge about the “**border business.**”
- Establish a “**peace institute**” or site an office of the United Nations here.

Across the Board

Some key themes cut across all of the discussions in small groups. They bear repeating here.

Great potential. Participants agreed that the region’s potential is enormous. The situation, the assets, even the problems to be turned around are filled with opportunity.

Location, natural resources, local community assets, transportation infrastructure, the global economic context, history, culture, architecture, organizational capacity, and more all bode well for the region if we can act appropriately.

Change is possible. The issues include lack of capital investment, deterioration in community assets, or environmental damage from the past. But participants also agreed that most of the obstacles are self-

made: lack of vision, courage, political will, cooperation, awareness, optimism, and so on. The good news is we can change these things if we decide to change them.

Economy and ecology together. We agreed the typical opposition of economy versus ecology no longer holds. Across all of these topics, economic and environmental values more and more are seen as interdependent. Developing the economy relies on restoring and preserving environmental values. Environmental regeneration is often understood as an economic opportunity.

Just connect. There is a need to

work, not only across two national jurisdictions, but across a whole range of local and regional jurisdictions and across sectoral boundaries in information gathering, analysis, planning, communication, coordination, decision-making and investment. We don’t need a “czar”. We do need to collaborate.



Next Steps

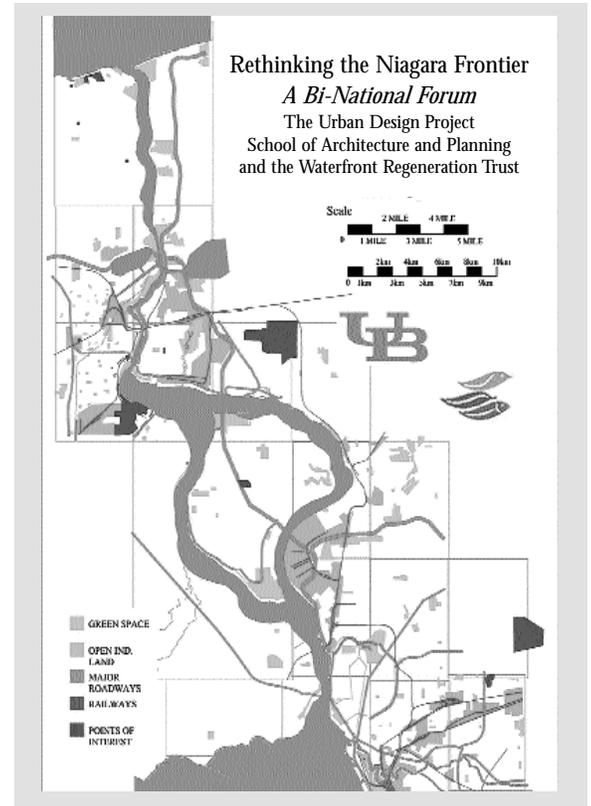
Forum participants expressed an interest to work together to help prepare the program and agenda for the Fall 2000 bi-national meeting. To that end, the enclosed survey has been designed to start that process. Please fill out the survey included as an insert to this newsletter and return it by fax or mail as soon as possible before June 9, 2000.

Provide feedback. Your comments are needed! If you have participated in the bi-national meetings held so far let us know your opinions about the agenda and results. Most important, please let us know what you think are the most important priorities for the region and how they can be achieved.

Participate. Over the coming months a series of working sessions will be held to further the exchange of information and to develop a relevant action-oriented agenda for the Fall 2000 bi-national forum.

There are several ways to participate – please indicate your preferences on the attached survey.

Showcase Projects. There are a significant number of projects underway in the region now – and many others that are planned. All of them could benefit from a stronger bi-national context. The working sessions will identify other well-developed project proposals as part of the agenda for the Fall 2000 bi-national forum.



Beth Benson, Executive Director
Waterfront Regeneration Trust
207 Queen's Quay West, Suite 403
Toronto, Ontario M5J 1A7
(416) 943-8080
bb@wrtrust.com



Robert G. Shibley, Director
The Urban Design Project
University at Buffalo
3435 Main Street (Hayes Hall)
Buffalo, NY 14214-3087
(716) 829-3483 x 218
rshibley@ap.buffalo.edu