

Community involvement could save lagoons

Less costly 'let it be' solution for lagoons often overlooked
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If you were to check out a satellite image of the Golden Horseshoe (the region covering Niagara to the Greater Toronto Area), you can spot a peculiar characteristic. Using your finger, you can trace the Lake Ontario shoreline from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Hamilton, to Toronto, and all the way out to Cobourg. Throughout this whole stretch, almost the entire shoreline is either urbanized or agricultural land. NOTL has a rarity though — it appears to be the only municipality at this end of Lake Ontario where old-growth forest meets the shore, as it did more than 12,000 years ago. Ever since I started exploring the federal military lands on Lakeshore Road as a kid, I have always marvelled at the habitat complexity found there. In a small area, you've got towering mature Carolinian forest, coastal marshes, forested wetlands, and a gritty, relatively undisturbed shoreline. This combination doesn't appear anywhere else on the map in the Golden Horseshoe. However, this is what the majority of Lake Ontario's shoreline once looked like. There is an area of this property that has been causing two types of stink as of late. The two sewage ponds are confirmed to be decommissioned, but what is to happen with them now? The Region appears to support filling the ponds in, resulting in an open landscape that would eventually regenerate into a meadow, and then a forest. The second option, which is to simply let them be, is far less costly and would continue to provide for the existing ecosystem, as NOTL's Harmony Group of residents has actively promoted. I believe both options have environmental benefit. One creates a new type of habitat on the property and quickly removes the "stinkma" surrounding it, but at a significant cost to do the work. The other option is truly simple, an often over-looked "just let it be" approach that sometimes applies very appropriately to natural ecosystems. Although these two ponds were created artificially, they have been established for so long now they have effectively become part of the natural system. The Region is saying that without the provided water to these ponds from sewage treatment, they would eventually dry up. The ponds have been established for so long though, I objectively question how quickly, if at all, these ponds would ever go dry. I think a proper soil and hydrological study needs to be conducted, if it hasn't already, or at least revisited. We need to understand the dynamic of the drainage and soil type associated with these ponds. If it seems unlikely the ponds will eventually dry up, then you've got my vote to keep them there. If they remain, here's what we can do to enhance the area for both wildlife and people alike. We find funds and initiatives to plant native tree and plant species. This is also a solid opportunity for community involvement. And not just trees for the land, but other plants that are best suited to an aquatic environment in the lagoons. In doing so, we can also work with a very talented bunch of staff, and they aren't even human. They are species of plant that are naturally excellent water purifiers. For example, some areas of the world have used floating treatment wetlands (FTWs) to clean up freshwater environments affected by excess nutrients (in this case, human excrement and the nutrients associated with it). FTWs have been shown to work with undeniable success in storm water ponds, waste management lagoons, and inner-city water bodies. These floating islands of vegetation are created on land and then thrown into the water; there, they simply float around just doing what they're meant to do — filtering and recycling nutrients and breaking down harmful compounds. This cleans the water and will eventually remove unpleasant odours of the past. With the addition of native plant species and correct biological controls, the water quality will rebound, and the wildlife sensitive to such water conditions can thrive or perhaps make a

return to an area where they once lived. Add in some bird boxes, bat houses, and some pollination-friendly plants, and we suddenly have a world of opportunity. We could educate the public about what NOTL has done to meet climate change and biodiversity initiatives, and we would also be graced with an outdoor laboratory that could open up possibilities for research, school involvement, and general public education. I am really drawn to the idea of a Heritage Nature Park, as described by NOTL's Harmony Group. This area has potential as a diverse and unique eco-park. I am going to get visionary for a second here, so bear with me. Imagine this area just on the outskirts of downtown NOTL, a short drive or bike ride away. Locals and tourists alike visit it, taking in the sheer diversity of habitat on one property. There are trails, perhaps a more rugged one, but also a wheelchair accessible and relaxed walk option. These trails have minimal environmental impact. We have signs educating people in a fun and approachable way about the property, its natural heritage and historical significance, and what NOTL and other organizations have done to protect it. Some are having a nice family picnic, others are on a boardwalk somewhere trying to spot an endangered species of bird flying overhead. Meanwhile, school groups and aspiring students visit the remediating wetlands and gain an understanding of natural succession, and in a bigger picture, our relationship with nature in terms of decision-making. Lastly on this vision, there are parcels of that property I believe should remain off-limits — for nature and science only, considering how rare this type of land is along Lake Ontario. As the process moves along, I encourage NOTLers and decision-makers to let science talk, and to imagine a greener, healthier, more proactive NOTL. bwhikes@gmail.com

The steep banks on the shoreline of Lake Ontario on this federal property are home to a colony of provincially threatened bank swallows. This is also one of the only areas in NOTL where Bjorgan says he has heard spring peepers, a type of tree frog, calling. There is a lot of ecological value here to appreciate, he says. (Owen Bjorgan) C