

John Sewell remarks to Heritage Conservation Conference,
Collingwood, Gayety Theatre.

Saturday May 31, 2008, 11.30 am.

`Strategies to Respect Ontario Towns`

I will be talking about Ontario towns and how they might gain more respect from the changes washing over them. I want to begin by recounting several features of Collingwood's history, since it provides something of a template for other Ontario communities of the same size.

Collingwood became a place only after a decision was made to build a railway from Toronto to Georgian Bay to provide shipping opportunities on the Great Lakes – the Welland Canal was a small and mean trench which did not accommodate bigger boats. The first train arrived in 1855, and Collingwood then began to grow, from a few families, to a few thousand, then to almost 7000 by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Like every other small town, manufacturing in Collingwood was carried on by relatively small companies, employing three or four men working more as artisans and craftsmen than as manufacturing employees. Like other settlements, it had its own small tannery, ironworks, and sawmill. Capital costs were not significant and while the levels of skills were considerable they were the result of well rounded craftsmen rather than specialized experts. As geographer Jacob Spelt notes, manufacturing was “a village handicraft in small workshops.” He found that breweries had an average of four employees, sawmills ten, tanneries five; foundries 15; and woollen factories 10.

One reason for the small scale of enterprise was the difficulty involved in transporting goods and materials any great distance. Spelt states “the

inadequate transportation network made it difficult to ship goods and raw materials, particularly flour and lumber over long distances. Consequently, on account of [the small size of local] markets, the workshops did not grow into large factories.” It meant that small towns, being somewhat self-reliant, were vibrant places.

By 1880 there was a significant railway network in Ontario and it converged on Toronto. Aided by the National Policy which in 1878 imposed high tariffs on manufactured goods coming into Canada, large factories in Toronto proliferated. These large factories also were a result of more reliable electrical and steam power, and the large markets available through improved transportation. They had large work forces, and the degree of specialization meant that the quality of products improved considerably while the price went down. The factories producing tractors and other machines for farms in Western Canada shows the change: whereas firms that manufactured agricultural implements had an average of 12 employees in 1871, by 1911 the average had zoomed up to 165. Obviously, smaller factories found themselves at a disadvantage. They were unable to make constant improvements to products, and they could not match the price of the larger enterprises. Investment went to the large new plants, not the small ones in the small towns. By 1911, Toronto had no less than 70 per cent of all the manufacturing employees in south central Ontario.

The impact of this economic change on communities like Collingwood was astounding. In 1891 Collingwood had 78 manufacturing enterprises but a decade later that number had been cut to 36, and by 1911 it was down to 28. All communities of a comparable size suffered the same fate. Orillia, for example, went from 73 manufacturing firms in 1891 to 40, twenty years later;

Penetanguishene from 39 to 19; Peterborough from 216 to 65; and Midland from 35 to 17 firms. Smaller communities fared even worse. Bowmanville went from 86 in 1891 to 10 in a decade; Aurora from 64 to 8; and Orangeville from 103 to 6. The change in the structure of manufacturing was enormous.

The population of Ontario jumped from about two million at the end of the 19th century to slightly over 11 million by the end of the 20th century, but very few of those new souls resided in towns. Small towns were frozen.

Like many other towns, Collingwood's population had reached its high point in 1911 - about 7500 - and then declined until after the Second World War when it slowly began to increase by 50 or 100 persons per year. The fifty year period between 1915 and 1965 might be described as stagnant for Ontario towns.

This scenario of vibrancy, economic collapse, then stagnancy for half a century - played out in virtually every small Ontario town. Growth was seen only in the 1970s and later, and that growth, in comparison with what was happening in the big cities, was miniscule. Cities would grow 10 or twenty thousand a year, but towns would grow by a few dozen, at most one hundred. Big cities approved apartment complexes of several hundred units at virtually every council meeting. Small towns prized a half a dozen building permits for houses a year. After these decades of no growth, one can understand why local politicians in small towns lunge at anything that promises growth and change.

There are two defining characteristics of heritage in Collingwood. One is the main street, Hurontario Street, and the structures which line it. The

older brick buildings were constructed after a devastating fire in 1889. Many are three stories high, with retail at grade and two stories of work space or residential quarters above. They front flush to the sidewalk and the building face creates a memorable sense of space.

The second defining characteristic is the residential areas to either side. West of Hurontario is a grid pattern of regular blocks with large lots carefully planned according to a set pattern. East of Hurontario – that is, the other side of the tracks – there is an irregular street pattern developed over time and filled with a surprising variety of uses and structures; this was the area that was privately planned. There are many marvellous 19th century homes in both areas, and with common setbacks and mature trees, both areas are beguiling and charming.

Collingwood Town Council placed little value on either of these aspects of its heritage. In 1965, town council implemented a zoning bylaw declaring that only single family houses would be permitted and lots were required to be at least 50 feet wide. This meant that the natural division of large 19th century residences into smaller units of several apartments was immediately curtailed, as was the opportunity to sell off parts of a house lot to allow the construction of new smaller units. The effect was to prevent the consolidation and infilling which brings renewal and respect to the old. Instead, this new bylaw required the town's physical expansion.

Second, in 1973 council supported an application to build a shopping plaza on the edge of town. Those proposing the shopping plaza used the age-old argument – now heard from the proponents of Big Boxes - that the town was about to grow and that the downtown was not the appropriate place for

modern retail space. “The fact that many medium and large enterprises cannot find adequate space in the town” argued the proponents of the shopping plaza, “has resulted in a lack of variety of retail merchandise for its customers. This in turn has caused many people to shop in centres such as Owen Sound, Barrie and Toronto, where they have a wide selection of retail goods and more competitive prices.” Economic studies were produced which showed that the sales potential of the shopping plaza were about \$10 million in 1974 and that the plaza would employ 150 people full-time and a further 50 part-time and at Christmas.

Downtown merchants opposed the proposal and forced council’s approval to be reviewed by the Ontario Municipal Board hearing, where they were represented by none other than a young Jane Pepino. The OMB concluded that the shopping plaza was not in conformity with the intentions expressed in the town’s planning documents to support the central business district. “Shopping centres should have an integrating function as between the facility and the community life of the area,” read the Board’s decision. “To facilitate this aim, the shopping centre should be located closer to the areas of projected residential growth and to the existing residential areas.” This was a momentous decision. If the shopping centre had been approved there is no question but that the downtown would have deteriorated to such an extent that it had no real presence, as has occurred in many other Ontario towns. This was the decision that gave people a reason to visit Collingwood in the following decades.

Then, in the 1970s, the growth began. Families which had come to Collingwood to ski began to think it might be a good place to live. As RRSPs and pensions provided retirees with high standards of living, and as health care meant people had a more active retirement, there was a large group of

healthy, smart, and well-healed individuals ready to move out of Toronto to somewhere that was smaller. They came to Collingwood, and to many other small towns in southern Ontario. They wanted a slower pace with more charm, and a place where social relations were more intimate. They were certainly not looking to live in a new Mississauga.

But the development community recognized the opportunity, and the planners – having graduated from Ontario planning schools – knew what kind of planning mechanisms that developers wanted. The patterns established for new development were those established for Don Mills and Mississauga, and they were imported holus bolus into towns like Collingwood. I believe most everyone was appalled, but did not know what to do. People would fight hard and long to protect an older structure, and that was where the heritage struggles were played out. What happened on the edge of town was allowed to happen, as though events there were beyond control.

The growth around the historic community of Collingwood – the place had been stable and stagnant until 1965 – has been like wildfire. Some of that growth is within the boundaries of the municipality, and some of it is beyond, such as in the Town of Blue Mountain and Clearview Township. In all cases the growth is in the low density single use mode – Don Mill style subdivisions with large lots and curvy streets, and big box retail. The sense of the older town has been exploded almost into oblivion. One comes out of the Galaxy movie theatre into a suburban shopping plaza that is so generic one feels almost unhinged by the experience. The heritage aspects of the town hang on by a thread. Some older buildings survive and people fight hard for them, but it feels as though it is just a matter of time before they are destroyed. Some, like the Admiral Collingwood high school up the street, are

destroyed by vandals posing as developers. As economic life is drained from the street where this Gayety Theatre stands to the vapid new edges, the world will quickly find there is no reason to visit Collingwood because it is another boring subdivision wasteland – it is no longer an interesting and distinctive small town.

Some say the problem is a small town mentality but I disagree. If there is such a thing as a small town mentality, it has been submerged in the ethos of the big city which celebrates the future at the expense of the present and the past. We drown in an ethos that we are smarter and wiser than those who came before us and that only by destroying what they created can the world become a better place. It is a fallacy. We need to restore the sense of continuity, that we should attempt to add to our legacy, not overthrow it.

Sadly, it is not just Collingwood which has experienced this other-worldly experience. Bobcaygeon, for one, feels exactly the same. But nothing is beyond redemption. Something can be salvaged from any place, and that's what we must turn to. So what do we do? What lessons can we learn from this history of Collingwood?

Here are some thoughts.

a) Heritage has something to do with individual buildings, but it is mostly concerned with the feel of a place, the way it is structured. We have to be much broader than trying to save individual buildings of merit. We have to talk about retaining the structure of the small town's settlement.

b) Heritage has as much to do about the edges as the centre. If economic activity is attracted to the edges, the centre cannot hold. Too many people

with cars on the edges will cause the centre to self destruct.

c) Small places within an hour or two of a city in southern Ontario are bound to grow, and most of the people who come are people from big cities with money and with many skills. They are usually attracted by the feel of the small town, that is, by the heritage elements. It will be next to impossible to dampen this growth, but at the end of the day the growth is small in big city terms, maybe a few hundred units a year.

I'm suggesting we must take a new approach if we want to enhance the Collingwood of this province: think of the whole, not the pieces; the edge as well as the centre; understand that growth is manageable and brings talents and resources.

I think these observations apply to almost all small towns in Ontario, and that a common approach can be devised which apply to them all, tweaked, of course, for special local circumstances. I think that if one principled template can be created it can be used by many small towns to their advantage. The key is creating one set of approaches that can be used by many. Here is a starting list of suggestions for rethinking how to generate respect for small town Ontario.

1. Make it easy and straightforward to convert existing buildings into several units and/or into different uses, and also make it easy to add additions and new structures on existing lots. These rules can ensure that it is difficult to demolish existing buildings and, through setback and form requirements, that new structures respect older ones.

I suspect that in most towns, as in most cities, current bylaws make these changes very difficult to achieve when they should be the easiest thing to do. A generic set of rules that apply to most situations would be a tool of significant use in many small towns. We could probably set these out on a single page.

2. Set good rules for expansion of the settlement area of the town. Currently, new areas are stuck on without regard for what is there, and the additions detract rather than strengthen the feel of the town. What's needed here is replication. New streets must be the extension of existing streets. The block size must be the same as the existing block size. Set backs must be the same as existing setbacks. Form must be similar. Style? Of course that is allowed to change, but it must be within the template that was established for the town more than 100 years ago. This is radical change since developers and planners don't seem to notice what is there today.

One can hear the argument they will make: the advantage of the curvy street in providing attractive vistas; the need for the two car garage dwarfing the house; the economic benefits of using off lumber sizes to create lumpy houses. But like the arguments made for demolishing the old to make way for the new, one must push these to one side and say – learn from the past.

3. Be tough on what is expected of new retail. Remember the lesson from Collingwood in the 1970s – if the downtown merchants had not successfully stopped the new fangled shopping plaza proposed for the edge of town, there would be almost nothing left in Collingwood today to celebrate. This place would be like Trenton. The big boxers will scream as they always do when

people say they must change their ways. I look at the Loblaws just down the street and think: imagine if town council had required that the building face onto Hurontario Street rather than onto a parking lot, imagine how much stronger Hurontario Street – indeed the whole town - would be.

We need new rules saying new retail will be located in structures which are generally of the same scale as older retail in the town. These buildings must face streets, with front walls and doors abutting sidewalks. They must have two or three stories, with retail on grade and other uses above. Parking can be behind in stacked structures.

The argument I am making is that we must address the big issues which are washing away the small town heritage of Ontario, and we must do it directly. Of course we must try to save individual heritage buildings, but I personally am getting tired of arguing over whether one particular structure has heritage value and another does not. I believe anything a few decades old must be presumed to have heritage value, and – as we heard so powerfully last evening - its environmental value is probably just as significant as its heritage value. I fear our energy is being sapped by the building-by-building struggle only to find that the heritage structures are being isolated in an environment which is insensitive to them. I have the same concerns about heritage districts, and fear putting so much energy into one small part of town while other areas slip away. If the edge gets out of control, the centre cannot hold.

My suggestion is that one template be created on these three themes: encourage infill; replicate the centre on the edges; control new retail space. One generic set of ideas will be helpful in many settings. But I think there is also the opportunity to create a broader province-wide approach. The

Provincial Policy Statement talks about a 'policy-led planning system'. What could be better than having a good policy about small town development which strengthens small towns? At the moment there's but a tiny reference in the Policy Statement – Section 2.6.1 - to cultural heritage saying significant built heritage and landscapes must be conserved. It is not good enough. Towns in Ontario must be respected, and this can be done in provincial policy.

I am optimistic to think that there are allies for this kind of approach among the leaders in many towns across this province. I believe they would be supportive of generic policy suggestions respecting existing settlement areas, about ideas constraining the kind of expansion which may occur, and about the kind of retail space that should be permitted. Perhaps they will push to amend local official plans to reflect these ideas. I suspect many would be willing to push the province to add to the Provincial Policy Statement so there are good general rules which stop the argument that if one place doesn't take big box retail then it will lose out to another place which does.

I also believe that many of the newer residents to towns would strongly support policies which require character to be retained and strengthened in any new development. I think it is you, the people in this room, who must lead this change.

Maybe I am out of step with the times, but I keep feeling we are getting closer to a new era of progressive political ferment. I see the fatigue in the current political structures and can feel the wish among many for new visions about how we can live our lives together. Maybe we are on the cusp of better times for questions of heritage and how we fit the present into the past – and I know there is nothing lost by always assuming we are on that cusp. Imagine an agenda that gave respect to Ontario's towns, and helped towns to change in

ways which added to their strength instead of leading to their demise. I've tried to suggest what that agenda might look like and some of the forces that can be harnessed to make it a reality. Maybe there are many waiting to hear that message.

Thank you.