

# **The Rideau Canal and the Trent-Severn Waterway**

## **A Future at Risk**

### **Media Release**

Through the media and from other sources, we have learned that the Federal Government proposes to make dramatic changes to the vision and role of Ontario's historic canals in its implementation of federal Budget 2012.

We are a group of retired Parks Canada managers with more than 225 combined years of experience in managing Canada's national parks and national historic sites and we think the Government may have the vision wrong.

This vision appears to describe a future without the expertise to understand and protect the natural and cultural resources of the two waterways and seems to abandon any pretence of telling the story of these special places to Canadians.

The vision de-emphasizes navigation and service to boaters leaving important questions as to the maintenance and recapitalization of nearly \$5 billion in public infrastructure.

We would like to remind the Federal Government that they have significant legal and fiduciary responsibilities to manage the water in four large watersheds totalling tens of thousands of square kilometres with more than 8,500 linear kilometres of shoreline. There are many thousands of individual shoreline properties and several million Canadians are impacted environmentally, recreationally and financially by the two waterways .

The proposals put at risk some of the largest wetlands in the Province and more than 60 identified species at risk.

Also at risk is a sport fishery with a value in central Ontario alone of \$300 million annually and the drinking water of more than a million citizens – drinking water that sometimes hovers on the edge of “acceptable” in terms of nutrient loading and e-coli contamination and is subject to periodic, toxic blue-green algae blooms.

The Federal Government shares with municipalities and the Province the responsibility of regulating development and dredging activities to preserve water quality and protect high value wildlife habitat. Parks Canada also has the legal responsibility to respond to spills and to display a leadership role in ensuring that contaminated lake and river beds are addressed.

Similarly, these waterways also represent a record of more than 9,000 years of First Nation use through archaeological resources at Mnjikaning, Healey Falls and Lovesick lakes among many locations. These resources will be at risk if shoreline development and dredging is not assertively regulated.

The Rideau and Trent-Severn represent an irreplaceable archaeological record but also a story of extraordinary engineering and innovation. Most of the original structures of the Rideau continue in service to this day and, together with the liftlocks and marine railway of the Trent-Severn, are engineering monuments to the creativity and adaptation of Canada's builders.

We have reviewed the Federal Government proposals that have been made public and are left with a number of questions.

- Without staff specialized in natural and cultural resource management, how can we be assured that the government will be able to protect these resources, tell their stories to Canadians and meet its national and international commitments?
- Without professional engineering staff and adequate capital funding, how can we be assured that critical infrastructure will be maintained so that the canals can continue to operate?
- Does the Government fully understand the risk of these proposals with respect to flood abatement, drinking water quality and quantity and hydro electric generation and can we be assured that appropriate levels of public safety and security will be maintained?
- Does the Government fully understand the economic impact of reduced seasons and hours of lock operations for businesses, communities and property values?

We call on the Federal Government to demonstrate clearly that they and others understand the risks in these proposals and to permit other ideas to be brought to the table in open discussion. As part of this discussion, Parks Canada must share with Canadians the results of the numerous studies and analyses that we know have been carried out but which have not been made available.

Finally, we call on other orders of government, the Province and Municipalities, to engage with a sense of constructive contribution in defining a future for these waterways that acknowledges the critical benefits they receive from the Rideau Canal and the Trent-Severn Waterway.

Fred Alyea, former Director of Canal Operations, Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site of Canada

Dave Ballinger, former Director of Canal Operations, Rideau Canal National Historic Site of Canada

John Bonser, former Superintendent, Rideau Canal National Historic Site of Canada

Ken East, former Superintendent, Trent-Severn Waterway National Historic Site of Canada

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Dear Member of Parliament

**Subject: The Rideau Canal and the Trent-Severn Waterway – A Future at Risk**

More than a hundred and seventy five years ago, Colonel John By had a vision for a waterway connecting Lake Ontario to the Ottawa River at what would become the Nation's capital. More than a century and half later, the Rideau would be declared a World Heritage Site. Similarly, Nicol Hugh Baird, around the same time, also had a vision for construction of a series of dams, locks and canals that would link Lake Ontario with Georgian Bay re-making the landscape of Central Ontario and becoming the Trent-Severn Waterway.

These waterways would be regarded as transportation routes until 1972 when the Federal Cabinet transferred the canals from the Department of Transport to Parks Canada giving them a much broader mandate to serve Canadians.

*Under the Conservation Program there should be a shift in emphasis in the management of the canal systems from "transportation" to historic restoration, preservation and interpretation; natural environmental preservation and interpretation and the optimum use of federal lands.*

In the 1970's, the Cabinet also endorsed recommendations from a Canada-Ontario study recognizing that the opportunities and challenges of Ontario's historic canals would be best assured within a broad collaborative framework engaging other orders of government. A Panel on the Future of the Trent-Severn Waterway re-iterated that vision in 2008.

We are a group of retired Parks Canada managers with more than 225 combined years of experience in managing Canada's national parks and national historic sites and we think the Government may have it wrong.

Although public information on their proposals is difficult to obtain, we understand that the Government is now considering a much restricted vision for the two waterways in its implementation of Budget 2012.

This vision appears to describe a future without the expertise to understand and protect the natural and cultural resources of the two iconic waterways and seems to abandon any pretence of interpretation of these special places to Canadians.

The vision seems willing to de-emphasize navigation and service to boaters, notwithstanding their centrality to the existence of the two waterways, and it leaves important questions as to the maintenance and recapitalization of nearly \$5 billion in public infrastructure.

We would like to remind the Government that, through the Constitution Act of 1867 and other legal instruments, they have significant legal and fiduciary responsibilities to manage the water in four large watersheds totalling tens of thousands of square kilometres with more than 8,500 linear kilometres of shoreline. These waterways have untold thousands of individual shoreline properties and impact

environmentally, financially and recreationally on the lives of several million Canadians . They include some of the largest wetlands in the Province and are home to more than 60 identified species at risk. The Government of Canada should not be allowed to abdicate these responsibilities.

This water supports a sport fishery with a value, in central Ontario alone, of \$300 million annually. We estimate that more than a million citizens draw their drinking water from waters under the jurisdiction of the Federal Government either directly or through municipal water supplies. Annual sampling by volunteers and others indicate that the quality of this water sometimes hovers on the edge of “acceptable” in terms of nutrient loading and e-coli contamination and is subject to periodic, toxic blue-green algae blooms.

The Federal Government through Parks Canada shares with upland municipalities and the Province the responsibility of controlling activities such as dock and shorewall construction, dredging and chemical/mechanical vegetation removal to preserve the quality of the water and prevent the disturbance of high value fish and species at risk habitat. They also have, according to other agencies and legislation, the primary responsibility to respond to toxic chemical and petroleum spills and to display a leadership role in ensuring that contaminated lake and river beds are addressed.

We are disturbed that the Federal Government proposes carrying out these duties without any scientific expertise whatsoever.

Similarly, these waterways also represent a record of more than 9,000 years of First Nation use through archaeological resources at Mnjikaning, Healey Falls and Lovesick lakes among many locations. These resources are perhaps the longest continuous record of habitation and use of this land and will be irrevocably lost if shoreline development and dredging is not assertively regulated.

The Rideau and Trent-Severn not only represent an irreplaceable archaeological record but their dams and locks and power plants represent a story of extraordinary engineering and innovation. Most of the original structures of the Rideau continue to provide the same service now as they did when they were constructed nearly two centuries ago. The Peterborough Liftlock and the Severn River Marine Railway on the Trent-Severn are engineering monuments to the creativity and adaptation of Canada’s builders.

It is unconscionable, in our view, that the federal government seems willing to turn their back on its responsibilities for the management of these cultural resources without making alternative provision for their protection.

Documents we have seen indicate that the Government will continue to have responsibility for management of levels and flows in the four watersheds however it seems that it is intended that this be accomplished without benefit of any professional expertise other than engineering technicians. Details have yet to be released regarding the organization and staffing for water management but staff reductions are anticipated.

We would like to remind the Government that maintenance of levels and flows serves a range of critical public interests beyond navigation including the protection of essential fish and wildlife habitat and

processes; provision for public safety and infrastructure protection through flood abatement; ensuring adequate quality and quantity of domestic drinking water; and, delivering water to 24 hydro electric generating plants serving the electricity needs of hundreds of thousands of Ontarians.

Proposals already discussed in public call for reductions in hours and seasons of lock operation to reflect actual demands for service. These will diminish the traditional role and raison d'être of the waterways leaving open some very large questions about the future of the waterways. They will also without doubt have negative impacts on the financial viability of several dozen marinas and tour and houseboat operations. Some operate on narrow margins and will not survive the inevitable loss of business. It is important to note that these commercial operations play a significant role in the education of visitors about the canals and the core responsibilities of Parks Canada in accordance with its mandate.

We understand that Parks Canada must share with other federal departments the challenges of Budget 2012 and we also understand that Ontario's historic canals cannot be immune from the reductions. We are concerned however **that the process of determining the response is occurring at least in isolation if not in secret without dissemination of the information upon which the proposals are based and without the engagement of a wide range of potential partners that will be affected.**

We call on the Federal Government to pause in the implementation of their proposals so they can demonstrate clearly that they and others understand the risks of their current proposals and so other ideas can be brought to the table in open discussion. As part of this discussion, **Parks Canada must share with Canadians the results of the numerous studies and analyses that we know have been carried out but which have not been made available.**

Finally, we call on other orders of government, namely the Province and Municipalities, to engage with a sense of constructive contribution in defining a future for these waterways that acknowledges the critical benefits they receive from the Rideau Canal and the Trent-Severn Waterway.

Signed by:

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c.c. Members of Provincial Parliament

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