

FRIENDS OF THE RIDEAU

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The Honourable Peter Kent
Minister of the Environment
Terrasses de la Chaudière
10, rue Wellington
Gatineau, QC K1A 0H3

Dear Minister Kent,

I am writing to convey the concerns of Friends of the Rideau regarding the impact of the proposed cuts to the budget of Parks Canada as they apply to the Rideau Canal National Historic Site and UNESCO World Heritage Site. The members of Friends of the Rideau are very concerned that measures being considered to meet arbitrarily set budget reduction targets will result in a lessening of Canadians' opportunities to enjoy an important part of their heritage and appreciate and understand their history, as well as putting at risk the integrity of the Rideau Canal itself. Moreover, at a time when this region, like many others throughout Canada, are relying on tourism as an economic driver, creating private sector jobs, any attrition of the operation of the Rideau Canal will have a negative impact on the economy of eastern Ontario.

Friends of the Rideau, an organisation made up of volunteers passionate in their support for and concern for the Rideau Canal, works to enhance public awareness of, knowledge of and enjoyment of this national treasure. As you can understand, the heritage significance of the Rideau has a great deal to do with the place the Canal holds in the life of eastern Ontario. The budget cuts proposed will erode the accessibility of the Rideau Canal heritage to thousands of visitors. It will call into question your government's commitment to protecting and preserving that heritage and enhancing visitors' opportunities to visit and appreciate an operating early 19th century canal whose construction brought together the founding populations of Canada. It is much more than just numbers of boaters. Parks Canada must ensure it has the capacity to meet its mandate of protecting and presenting the natural and cultural heritage of the Rideau Canal to all users and visitors. If Parks Canada's responsibilities for the Rideau Canal are reduced to water management, boating operations and maintenance, there will be little heritage value and integrity and no interpretive capacity to attract visitors, whether Canadian or international.

The international aspect is significant as it has been suggested that one important consequence of neglecting the heritage significance of the Rideau Canal could be the loss of UNESCO World Heritage Site designation. The World Heritage Committee is currently evaluating the management and operation of this new World Heritage Site. It would be a major blow if it decides that Canada has abandoned its responsibility to protect this important part of our cultural heritage which illustrates so well human creative genius, captures a significant historic landscape and has outstanding universal value. In particular, the decision to designate the Rideau Canal as a World Heritage Site recognised the continued operation of the canal system as a demonstration of living heritage and it is this which is threatened by the proposed attrition of service.

Friends of the Rideau urges you, and your Cabinet colleagues, to ensure that cuts to the Parks Canada budget are applied fairly to the Rideau Canal and to ensure that, while important changes are being made to improve the management efficiency of the operations of Canada's historic canals, the heritage character and historic value of the canals, especially the Rideau, are protected. Shortening the operating season, arbitrarily reducing hours of service, and eliminating heritage interpretation services are the wrong way to discharge our responsibilities as stewards of Canada's history. If the front-line staff of Parks Canada at the Rideau Canal are given a mandate to work with local partners in the private and voluntary sector, and allowed sufficient time, we are confident that ways can be found to preserve Canal operations at current levels, preserve jobs in the private sector, protect and present the heritage values of the Rideau and raise additional revenue through innovative arrangements which will enhance Canadians awareness of and appreciation for this jewel in the crown of Canadian heritage. Friends of the Rideau would welcome the opportunity to be part of a dialogue between Parks Canada and private sector and voluntary sector partners to develop a plan to achieve those objectives.

Yours respectfully,

Hunter McGill
Chairman

Cc Hon. John Baird, MP
Gord Brown, MP
Scott Reid, MP
Pierre Poilievre, MP