

February 11, 2013

Letter to the Editor

I am not a boater, nor a cottager nor do I own shoreline property on any of the lakes and rivers of the Rideau Canal. I am, however, a former Lockmaster and I had the privilege of acting as the Superintendent of the Rideau Canal World Heritage Site prior to my retirement.

Last year the Government relented in its intent to shorten the operations season of the Rideau Canal and other Heritage Canals managed by Parks Canada due to the united voices of opposition from community leaders, citizens and business operators. Late in the Fall of 2012, the Government launched a much more draconian strategy of three parts: reduce the daily hours of operation of the canals, reduce staff levels and costs by \$2 million and finally to raise fees of services accorded to the boating public. It appears that one way or another, the Government must have its pound of flesh.

The Parks Canada Economic Impact Study of the Rideau Canal 2010/2011 determined that the \$10.5 million spent on the Rideau (\$7.3 in salaries), generated \$44.4 million to the GDP and supported 641 full time equivalent jobs. The Rideau Roundtable has stated that the Rideau generated \$12 million in tourism expenditures and created 600 full time jobs. The Parks Canada Study referred only to boaters or land based visitors to Lock Stations. If the economic benefits from other enterprises and activities associated with the canal such as hotels, resorts, the sports fishery, festivals, cottaging' hydroelectric power generation and the operation of municipal, provincial and private sector parks and campgrounds were added the true economic value of the Rideau Canal operations would be considerably greater. The higher shoreline property values generates increased tax revenues to the Province and municipalities to support services and infrastructure of the region.

The staff reduction measures have been conducted quietly in increments without generating awareness or concern about the impacts of these measures. At present, only 5 lockmasters remain on strength out of a complement of 24 positions. The entire Resource Conservation unit has been eliminated. The dedicated Water Control Technician has not been staffed and the Asset Management and Heritage Presentation capacity have been significantly reduced to the point where heritage values of the waterway may not be sustainable. Incidentally, most regional residents may not be aware that the Rideau Canal manages water flows and levels throughout the watershed area and the manipulation of dams and weirs is performed by teams led by lockmasters. Water Management and Resource Conservation affects: water quality, fish spawning, survival of hibernating species, water recreation, municipal water supplies, hydroelectric power generation and mitigates the damage potential of flooding or drought conditions. Farmers cannot work their fields in the Spring if the Canal makes an error in water management. At present there remains little capacity to sustain the heritage values of the waterway and full range of activities conducted in the watershed area.

The continuously changing fee proposals from Parks Canada and the shortened daily operations schedule have already damaged the reputation of Parks Canada with the public. It is almost inevitable that the Rideau will experience future decreases in user traffic and lower revenues from the actions taken or under consideration with the related negative impacts on communities and small businesses of the region. This will initiate a cycle of diminishing use and future cost reductions. This will certainly have further negative impacts on small businesses and employment well beyond the value of the planned cost reductions and increased fees under consideration.

Why is the Government doing this? Why launch a strategy that both community leaders and the Private Sector feel will have devastating consequences to the economy of the region and Canada's international reputation? The Rideau Canal World Heritage Site should be considered an outstanding success, a source of national pride. Surely the User Pay Policy and the Government's overall thrust should be to do no harm and to build on the potential to be better. Why not challenge the Canal to be a better service provider and increase the economic return to the country while sustaining the values that make the waterway a heritage resource of global significance?

It is apparent that we are in an era of cynical attacks on costs without consideration of value or potential. The current strategy of the Government demonstrates a total lack of vision and imagination and will ultimately have damaging effects on the whole region. If that is the intent then mission accomplished Prime Minister Harper, Ministers Flaherty, Clemons, Kent and all the Government MPs who stand mute as this travesty unfolds.

Gord Giffin

Oxford Mills, Ontario