

Kanata West – A Balanced View

I am recently retired from the City of Ottawa and with that comes an opportunity to reflect a little more on what I read. As the former Director of Planning, Environment and Infrastructure Policy, I was the person responsible for leading the projects relating to the Carp River and the proposed development of Kanata West. As a result, I feel compelled to respond to both the article by Patrick Dare on April 24th and the City Editorial of April 25th. These dealt with the City Auditor's report on the Carp River and the proposed development in the area known as Kanata West. I found that in both cases only selected information was provided. This information appeared to be chosen because it served the author's intent without providing a balanced picture of this complex and very public process that has been underway for the better part of 7 years.

It started with a subwatershed plan on the environmental side which led to the Carp River Restoration Plan and environmental assessment. On the land use planning side, a concept plan and official plan amendment was prepared which led to the servicing plans and the related environmental assessments. At each stage, the level of detail increased as the studies moved from concepts to plans, from plans to environmental assessments and ultimately, these will become design and construction specifications. Every stage requires a greater degree of study and analysis with more refined and detailed results. Each time, local, provincial and federal agencies are and were involved and each stage required sign offs from these agencies and approvals from City Council.

Qualified professionals from a wide range of disciplines, engaged by both the public and private sectors, carried out and reviewed the work. At no point were the required sign offs or approvals not granted. However, this process has yet to be concluded. The Environmental Assessments are awaiting provincial approval. Following that approval, there still remains a further level of technical study and design to allow construction to actually take place.

So let me say that I am puzzled as to how a determination has been made, at this interim stage in the process, that the final outcome is terribly wrong.

Let's turn the clock back a bit to see how the process has unfolded to date. Just prior to amalgamation, lands in the vicinity of the then Corel Centre were designated for urban expansion by Regional Council. Prior to their development, it was necessary to carry out a variety of studies to prepare a plan. The first study, the Carp River Watershed Study, began in 2001. This was conducted and paid for by the now City of Ottawa, prior to the formation of any landowner group. This study was an overall examination of the watershed to determine the environmental constraints or restrictions on development. In other words, the foundation piece for all of the studies that followed. This study was approved by City Council in January, 2005 and subject to public comment and refinement up to November, 2005. At that time, an information report, summarizing the comments and indicating the next steps was tabled at Planning Committee and Council.

A key finding of the Watershed study was that the Carp River watershed was in serious trouble, both as an environmental system and as natural drain, due to years of neglect and improper drainage practices.

As well, the Watershed Study found that restoration works, similar to that carried out for the Corel Centre, were the most effective means to return the Carp River to its original, natural form and function. These works required cutting (removing fill in selected areas) and filling (adding new fill in selected areas) in a balanced way within the floodplain of the river to improve the flow, reduce erosion and improve the natural habitat. This resulted in an implementation plan that was developed as the Carp River Restoration Plan and related environmental assessment.

On a parallel track, a land use plan was prepared and approved by Council on March 26, 2003. This plan was premised on the environmental analysis from the Carp River Watershed Plan. The implementation of the land use plan required transportation and piped servicing master plans which in turn resulted in environmental assessments under the Environmental Assessment Act. In an attempt to simplify an already complex public process, it was decided to combine the environmental assessments for transportation and piped services with the one for the Carp River Restoration Plan. This allowed the community to participate and follow all of the parallel works and focus their comments and concerns on the various inter-related environmental assessments in one process. This work was completed and submitted for Council endorsement in May, 2006. Following the mandatory review period, these reports were submitted to the Ministry of the Environment where they are now awaiting approval.

Throughout this long process, there were countless formal and informal community meetings, individual meetings with stakeholders and ongoing verbal and written dialogue. There was regular coverage in all forms of media. Concerns and comments were raised and answered or where necessary additional work was done to provide the answers. When these issues were discussed at Committee and Council, there was a full disclosure of the facts and a fulsome debate before approval was granted – and granted it was at each step in the process.

As noted at the outset, there were professionals from a wide variety of disciplines, both public and private sector, that carried out and reviewed the quality of the work. Did they all agree at every step in the process – no they did not - where additional analysis was required to achieve consensus then it was undertaken. There is clear support evident in the media coverage for the Auditor's report that states there is 'a conflict of interest' when the public and private sector work in co-operation.

As a former public servant and as a practising professional subject to a Code of Conduct and Ethics, I find that to be unusual and offensive. Unusual in that working co-operatively for the public good I always found to be a beneficial goal and offensive in that it suggests that as an employee or professional, I am deceitful and lack integrity. Nowhere in the Auditor's report do these allegations rise above the level of a perception yet these articles trumpet that this is clear evidence of a 'loss of trust' which must be corrected. All of the individuals involved in this process have been tarred and feathered without being granted an opportunity to comment or to provide the full story.

Much weight is given to the 'discovery of a significant error' in the modelling of the river flows as an example of the deep current of conflicted opinions that permeate the work. Without even completing further analysis with these 'missed' data sets, a terrible outcome has already been determined by the Auditor and the media. There was no deliberate cover up of these data sets and no collusion to hide

information from the public or Council. Indeed, it was an unfortunate mistake but without any significant consequence at this stage in the process. In fact, it is likely that if approval of the Environmental Assessments had already been granted, this information would have come to light during the technical design and construction phase of the project and corrective action taken at that time. As I noted earlier, approval of the Environmental Assessments is not the final step – the process is filled with checks and balances to ensure its success.

To close, let me say that this is an unfortunate chapter in a long and complicated story that is not yet finished. It is regrettable that the highly skilled and qualified team of professionals that have attempted to shepherd the Kanata West project through to implementation, have been castigated in the media and before Council for working in a co-operative fashion for the public good. Without the leadership of the public sector and the investment of the private sector, the Carp River watershed will remain as it is today - a highly degraded water course unable to sustain either terrestrial or aquatic habitats or to even carry out its bleak role drainage outlet.

Dennis Jacobs MCIP, RPP is a community development volunteer, a part-time planning consultant and past President of the Ontario Professional Planning Institute. He can be reached at dennis@momentumservices.org.