

A historic battle at the provincial level lies in the past of the Beaver Valley

(by Kate Russell)

The ongoing effort to preserve the ecosystem and natural amenity of Beaver Valley has been around much longer than the current development proposal.

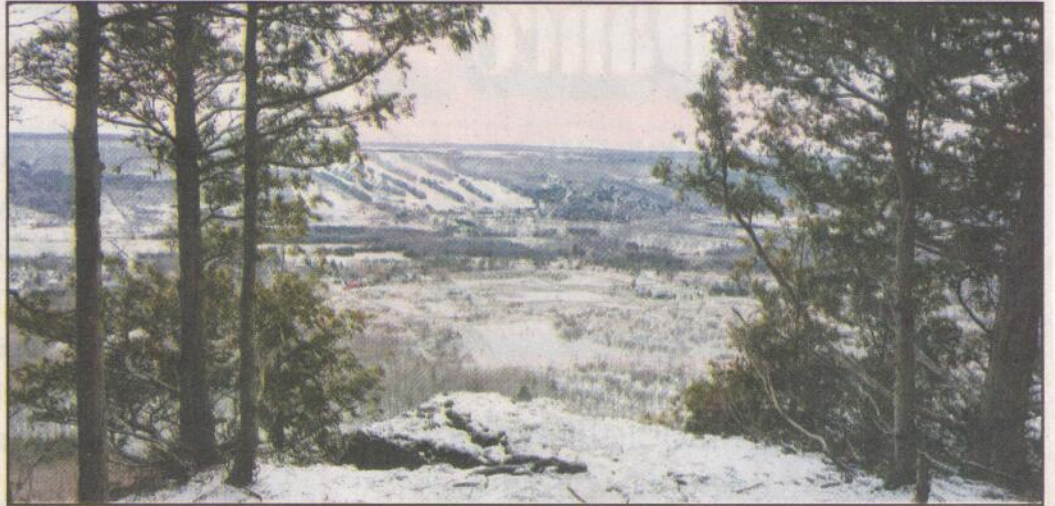
That was clear at the residents meeting in Kimberley which had environmental groups speaking about the plans for housing on lands above and below the former Talisman resort.

Rob Leverty, president of the Niagara Escarpment Foundation, provided an overview of past battles to save the valley from heavy-handed development.

"The valley is under stress from so many areas," said Leverty in his comments to the large crowd of concerned local residents and property owners gathered at Kimberley Hall.

"When the land was sold by the municipality that was the end of the beginning of this fight."

Leverty, who owns an organic farm near Epping on the west side of the valley, has personal experience of preserving the land.



Picturesque view from Old Baldy in Kimberley towards Talisman. (photo by Angela Schermaul)

His farm hosts part of the Bruce Trail and he says since he bought the land in the early 70s it has been a constant vigil to protect the valley's wildlife corridors and sensitive ecology.

"We don't need wellness centres, the valley is our health spa. That's really what we are fighting for," he said.

The Beaver Valley Development Group's vision for the property, as stated on its website, is to "create spaces and places that promote a healthy lifestyle, incorporate recreational based activities and amenities and agrarian community elements."

Preserving the vision of a natural escarpment is an old challenge Leverty and many others are ready to face again.

He was a founding member of the Beaver Valley Heritage Society, whose successful struggles are now chronicled in the archives at Wilfrid Laurier University.

He offered his perspective on the past and present challenges at the meeting and in a later interview.



Rob Leverty

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DUMPAVERTED

As early as 1973, when the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act (NEPDA) was adopted by the provincial government after significant public engagement, the then-township of Euphrasia (now part of the amalgamated Municipality of Grey Highlands) purchased 150 acres of land on the valley's west side near Epping for a garbage dump.

There was opposition to the idea at every level, and ultimately the province stepped in to stop the dump.

"In those days there was an official Beaver Valley Plan and the province realized the Beaver Valley was a special place," Leverty explained. "The province stepped in to make sure the dump stopped."

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED

The same year the NEPDA passed, the province acquired the Euphrasia dump site land, severed it into three parcels and sold it to a developer who wanted to build Epping Commons.

That company came back with plans for a large development between Talisman and Epping, that would have changed the face of the valley forever.

The proposal included 46 two-storey detached condos; a 50-room hotel; man-made ponds, a recreational facility; a swimming pool and six tennis courts on lands later designated natural and protection in the then-proposed Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP).

"It would have destroyed the Beaver Valley," said Leverty, who stayed the course through the six-year opposition to Epping Commons.

While the development was being opposed, the province was also in what Leverty calls the "most comprehensive public engagement process in the history of Ontario," to look at the Niagara Escarpment as a whole.

Opposition to the Plan

came not only from those looking to develop, but also from some local residents and council members. Their objections were to multiplying regulations from overlapping ruling bodies, increasing costs and red tape for landowners and restricting the land's use and value.

Those supporting the vision of the plan did not want to see "provincial and national natural assets sacrificed for municipal interests," as a Foundation background document puts it.

The public consultation resulted in the Niagara Escarpment Plan – a document resulting from "an historic decision to protect the escarpment at all costs," Leverty said.

Most of the Beaver Valley is within the two most protective (i.e., restrictive) land use designations of the NEP – Escarpment Natural Area and Escarpment Protection Area. The Talisman lands have the Escarpment Recreation Area designation.

SITE BECOMES PRESERVE

Ultimately, in 1986 after development plans were rejected in favour of maintaining the natural heritage of the site, ownership of the 350-acre Epping Commons lands was transferred to the Ontario Heritage Trust in return for a tax receipt for the full land value.

In 1994, at the five-year review of the NEP, the property was named Herman McConnell Memorial Forest to honour the valley resident (and planter of many trees) who was one of the leaders of the fight to protect the site from large-scale real estate development.

"We're forgetful about our environmental history," said Leverty, whose Foundation has provided documents to show the history in a seven-page letter to Grey Highlands council in May 2021.

He also provided the background to the BVDG when the Foundation refused a seat at its community reference group facilitated by The Planning Partnership.

Both documents are available on the Niagara Escarpment Foundation website. "It's more critical than ever to save this valley."

UNITED FIGHT AGAINST HYDRO LINE

Despite the public desire and political will to protect the escarpment, in the early 1980s there was a proposal to run a hydro corridor of six towers from Bruce Power through the valley near Heathcote.

Leverty says that the idea "galvanized support" from everyone – from farmers, other residents, hunters and fishermen and recreational users to avert the preferred route straight through the valley.

Fortunately, the government of the day diverted the power lines toward London away from escarpment lands.

NEW GENERATION

Today, Leverty sees the current potential for development under scrutiny by many volunteers who are banding together to protect the natural environment of the area.

"There's a whole younger generation of inspiring people," he said.

Since the pandemic, he has seen a huge increase of hikers on the Bruce Trail through his property, and wildlife has increased as lands further south are developed.

"People are desperate for natural places. This is just the beginning. We will fight this every step of the way."

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Thanks
Reed + Gail