

Breathing new life into industrial land

Trust has vision of trees, flowers in North End

By Eric McGuinness

The Hamilton Spectator (Jan 16, 2007)

Nature sanctuaries belong in the boonies, right?

Not along a railway track next to the site of the infamous Plastimet fire in industrial north Hamilton.

But that's just where the newly named Head-of-the-Lake Land Trust, an arm of the Hamilton Naturalists' Club, is planning its next venture.

It envisions native trees and wildflowers growing on old industrial land; habitat for birds, insects and other wildlife; a noise buffer; colourful foliage to enliven drab streets and an outdoor environmental laboratory for area schools.



Ron Albertson, the Hamilton Spectator

The land trust's first project in the core focuses on the east end of Simcoe Street, across from Jackie Washington Park.

Alan Ernest, the trust's program co-ordinator, says the club is already active in the inner city through its Nature in the Urban Neighbourhood project, run through schools and libraries.

It has long wanted to expand its volunteer efforts to restore natural areas there as well. Members want to go, "where the need is greatest, where kids need to have some relationship with the natural world. How else will we have a population in 20 years that values the natural environment?"

For its first urban core venture, the trust is focusing on the east end of Simcoe Street, across the tracks from Jackie Washington Park, which was built on the cleaned-up site of a spectacular 1997 fire that burned tonnes of scrap plastic stored in the old Usarco foundry on Wellington Street North.

With money from the Hamilton Community Foundation, the naturalists' club held a brainstorming session several years ago, then used air photos and land ownership maps to identify property along the edge of a valley that was part of Land's Inlet.

The inlet, which once allowed vessels to sail from the open harbour as far inland as Beasley Park on Wilson Street, was gradually filled during the 19th century and railway spurs were built along the valley bottom. One still in use is a CN track leased by the Southern Ontario Railway that crosses Simcoe Street as it runs diagonally between Ferguson Avenue and Wellington Street.

The land trust is eyeing two strips parallel to the track, one about 150 metres long by six to 15 metres wide north of Simcoe and another about 100 metres long and as wide as 20 metres to the south. Julia Kollek, a former Environment Hamilton staffer, has been hired to spearhead what's being called the Land's Inlet restoration. The trust is holding a community open house Saturday to ask area residents for their ideas.

Ernest says, "The kids' environmental group at the North Hamilton Community Centre is out every Saturday and they're already asking about installing bird boxes and bat boxes and collecting seed. And the Junior Ecoleaders program sponsored by the Royal Botanical Gardens and SISO (Settlement and Integration Services Organization) has already had kids and families there to clean up garbage, remove invasive Japanese knotweed and plant a pin oak."

emcguinness@thespec.com