



DAVE HEIDEBRECHT PHOTO

Bay Area Restoration Council community volunteers assisted Royal Botanical Gardens staff in 2013 to restore Cootes Paradise Marsh. It's up to each of us to help renew our community's longstanding commitment to collective environmental action, Chris McLaughlin writes.

Some remarkable, overlooked stories of water restoration

CHRIS MCLAUGHLIN

The past year started with the discovery that 11 Hamilton homes had, for many years, been flushing toilets into a storm sewer that emptied straight into the harbour.

The story made national news. Even discounting Hamilton's infamous environmental legacy, that was way over the top. So, let's start this year with a helpful and hopeful perspective on water.

As always, don't forget that the harbour was so badly polluted with human and industrial waste a century ago that the city declared swimming illegal.

Incredibly, conditions were much worse in 1969 when Colin Gibson, a local member of Parliament, called the harbour a "stinking, rotten quagmire of filth and poisonous waste."

In this community, so estranged from its water and so primed in recent years for bad news about sewage, we cannot afford to overlook some truly remarkable stories of progress in 2023 and the long-term commitments that made them possible.

For example, the city recently cut the ribbon on a \$340-million upgrade of the Woodward Wastewater Treatment Plant. It's now the largest tertiary filtration facility in Canada.

The new technology is a game changer because the plant's treated outflow is the largest single source of water entering the harbour. This phenomenal investment should

have a direct and significant impact on the harbour's overall environmental health.

It's an incredible achievement for the community.

We also celebrated the complete capture of toxic sediment at Randle Reef as the federal government initiated the final stage of work to close that steel box. The \$139-million project is the second-largest cleanup in the country and another incredible achievement for the community.

And, remarkably, positive outcomes continue to spin off from the sewage spill into Chedoke Creek.

The city was ordered by the province to dredge that mess, but has gone well beyond what was required. One notable advance is a Watershed Action Plan to help set future priorities right across the city. Had you asked me five years ago what I wished for, this plan would have been at the top of that list.

Be assured of two things. The harbour today is vastly improved from the worst of its abuse, but there are significant challenges to its continued recovery.

Some challenges are biological realities. Some are financial. But some are cynical assumptions about what's possible. Are those really still deserved?

In 1923, the chair of the harbour board received a petition from Hamilton residents alarmed by the dreadful state of the harbour. He subsequently declared that contamination of the water must cease.

But it didn't, of course, and Colin Gibson stated decades later that, "for many years the situation has gone from bad to worse."

In 2023, however, we could see that stark choices between environment and economy are a mug's game. The research is in. The results of more than 30 years of remedial actions to restore water quality, habitat, and esthetics in our harbour and many others across the Great Lakes clearly demonstrate a significant economic return on green investment.

Restoration funding in Canada and the United States is revitalizing not just fish and wildlife populations but their neighbouring human communities, too.

Still, those three realities will continue to be ongoing challenges in 2024. Just know that the city's rising water rates and new stormwater fees, however painful or imperfect, will directly contribute to the next steps needed to further repair our fractured relationship with water.

Hopefully readers will see the long-term value in these continuing, strategic investments because, more than ever, it's up to each of us to help renew our community's long-standing commitment to collective environmental action.

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