

# THERE IS NO COMPELLING REASON

Why on earth would we build a million-square-foot newtown on Escarpment lands?

## AN ALTERNATE HISTORY

### THE TALISMAN PROBLEM

Let us cast ourselves back to June of 1973. That year, the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) came into being, under the Niagara Escarpment Plan and Development Act, designed to:

***provide for the maintenance of the Niagara Escarpment and land in its vicinity as is compatible with that natural environment***

Talisman Ski Resort had then been operating for ten years, on the western slope of the Escarpment, north of the village of Kimberley.

Under the Act, the Commission applied a number of land use designations to Escarpment and abutting lands:

- Escarpment Natural Area
- Escarpment Protection Area
- Escarpment Rural Area
- Escarpment Recreation Area
- Minor Urban Centre
- Urban Area
- Mineral Resource Extraction Area

If not already in use, the various parts of the Talisman lands would have fallen under the first three restrictive designations. But the pre-existing use led to the lands (comprising ski slopes, service buildings, hotel accommodations and golf course) being 'grandfathered' into the Plan as an Escarpment Recreation Area.

## **AN ALTERNATE HISTORY**

All of the above is true, and did happen.

But let us imagine how things might then have developed, in a better world - follow italics:

*Recognizing that the resort might someday fail, the NEC, with notable foresight, stipulated, as a condition of the Escarpment Recreation Area designation, that the Talisman lands must, within five years of such failure, revert to the protective designations it would otherwise have carried without the grandfathering, (as happens when extraction operations fall out of use.)*

*A matching small-scale recreational use would be permitted though. Skiing served about 400 people at a time, and the golf course perhaps 30. No other (and they must be soft-recreational) uses exceeding 450 persons per day would be allowed; nor would any infrastructure exceeding the existing footprint be permitted.*

Talisman did fail, in 2009. Various attempts were made to purchase or refurbish the resort, but to no avail.

*In 2014, five years having elapsed without further use, and the NEC having confirmed the Talisman parcel now fully protected as it ought to have originally been, the site reverted to its three protection designations, and the wildlife corridors crossing it once more began to knit together.*

## **BEAVER VALLEY DEVELOPMENT GROUP NEWTOWN**

The Municipality of Grey Highlands (MGH) began to try to sell the land to a developer; the NEC ignored the parcel.

In February 2022, a developer, then named Westway, sensed that the confused state of the Talisman tract held an opportunity for massive development with no oversight. It purchased the land and began planning a 500-unit newtown. At 2,000sf per unit, this meant a million-square-foot development – about twice the size of Toronto’s SkyDome.

Proposal in hand, the developer blithely began to try to work with MGH and the NEC.

*It was laughed out of the room.*

*Even if the site had not reverted to protected status, how could either authority consider such an overwhelmingly intrusive misuse of public, protected land, when its surroundings were chockablock full of huge sensitive parcels?*

*Why should they shoehorn a completely foreign use into a natural, vulnerable area?*

**There is absolutely no compelling reason to destroy this protected environment.**

*Let development happen elsewhere, in locations where it synergizes with existing heavily-developed land. Why not build massive tracts of houses in more amenable locations elsewhere in Grey Highlands, or Grey County? Why should they be allowed on vulnerable land?*

*Why should the developer be assisted in attacking the wellbeing of the residents of neighbouring Kimberley and Amik and the taxpayers of MGH?*

*What about*

*The possibility of losing the site's UNESCO designation  
Huge traffic loading, necessitating traffic lights and calming  
Construction traffic, noise and dirt during construction  
Dangerous construction on karst topography  
Threat to existing water service  
Complete absence of social, health and education services  
Absence of transit, rendering affordable housing impossible  
Expansion costs of all municipal operations and services  
Wetland impacts  
Floodplain effects  
Groundwater spoilage  
Necessity of provision of public roads  
Absence of continuing maintenance and upkeep  
Obsolete planning approaches in a time of climate crises  
And the list went on . . .*

## **PRESENT STATUS**

Well, we all know that was all just a pipe dream.

The NEC showed no foresight in setting out a process for amelioration of the lands in the event of resort failure. It has ignored the vulnerable status of the Talisman lands. It is in active talks with the developer to smooth its way forward. It is a complaisant contributor to the problem rather than the environment-positive watchdog it is required, by law, to be.

MGH's approach to the situation (It was once an owner.) has been to activate the sale of the lands. It has used underhanded and secret manipulation to further the developer's activities. It has 'lost' the records it used to sell the land.

'Oh, that's all OK,' these two authorities gaslight us. 'Talisman was a recreation use and that's all these huge subdivisions of half a thousand residences are: **RECREATIONAL!**

Laughable. Correct the terminology: **500 housing units** is a **RESIDENTIAL** development and nothing other. The resort's original non-compliant designation does **not** give any later owner carte blanche to cram however much of whatever use it wants onto the site and down our throats.

This is a completely cynical cashgrab – find a seeming loophole, and suck everything you can out of it:

If you're the NEC, ignore the reality and ignore your one job:

### **Protecting the Escarpment.**

We look to our NEC and Council to protect us and our environment from the predations of carpetbagger developers, who chat us up in the near term, then take the money and run, leaving us holding the bag, once they've succeeded in sucking our home ground and our goodwill dry. Our authorities, far from protecting us, are instead complicit in this attack on us.

We should not be having to fight the NEC, MGH and the developer. We have no idea what pressure is being brought to bear on the NEC – what connections some of its members may have to the Ontario building-before-green government and other developers. We have no idea what records of malevolent dealing MGH Council is hiding. And we can only guess what weapons the developer is bringing to bear on us.

Arrangements are being made to meet with these bodies to pursue all of these problems.



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*Conservative government in revising its planning legislation. For the Georgian Triangle Development Institute, he produced the conference Saving the Goose: Regional Design Strategies for Maintaining Our Quality of Life. He has taught at the architecture schools of Waterloo, Carleton, Toronto and the Rhode Island School of Design. He has had a one-man show at Durham Art Gallery, and has been published here and abroad. He seeks to contribute to collaborative work in the pursuit of socially effective projects.*