



Niagara Community Observatory



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Cycle Tourism in Niagara Parks

The Niagara Parks Commission (NPC) has the enviable mission of preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of Niagara Falls and the lands situated along the Niagara River corridor. As one of Canada’s premier tourist destinations, millions of visitors descend on the beautiful parks and



trails of the Niagara Parkway each year. The Parkway and its trail that follows the river atop the steep bank and winds along wine and tender fruit countryside has become increasingly popular with cyclists. NPC believes it is time to focus efforts on creating memorable cycling experiences through the natural wonders of Ontario’s Niagara Parks.

While NPC efforts are currently suited primarily to the recreational cyclist, it is appropriate to assess emergent requirements relating to the various needs of cyclists, from recreational family cycling to

the serious cycling enthusiast. It is a financially sustainable vision that seeks to provide a safe and enjoyable cycling experience for both visitors and local residents, complementing businesses along the route such as the wineries and fruit stands, as well as historical sites, shopping and the theatre district of Niagara-on-the-Lake. This healthy living initiative is a natural next step in NPC’s overall mission.

NPC has teamed up with the Niagara Community Observatory at Brock University to consult with various stakeholders within the cycling community and survey the existing research in an effort to identify the strengths of its current cycling infrastructure as well as the challenges that need addressing.

NPC’s goal is to transform the beauty of the Niagara Parks into one of Canada’s premier cycling tourism destinations.

WHAT IS THE NIAGARA PARKS COMMISSION?

NPC is a self-funded agency (“operational enterprise”) of the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport. It was established in 1885 to control the lands and buildings immediately surrounding the Canadian Horseshoe Falls (62.2 hectares or 154 acres) now known as Queen Victoria Park.



NPC has since grown to include 1,325 hectares of land along the entire Niagara River Corridor, including 53 kilometres of recreational trail and 56 km of scenic parkway from Fort Erie in the south, to Niagara-on-the-Lake in the north. Its mission is “to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of the Falls and the Niagara River Corridor for the enjoyment of visitors, while maintaining self-sufficiency” (NPC website 2013).

It is governed by a 12-person Board of Commissioners including four municipal appointees – one each from Niagara Region, Town of Fort Erie, City of Niagara Falls and the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake. The board is responsible for making policy decisions and providing guidance to staff. The Commission is accountable to the Province of Ontario.

NPC has its own police service, road maintenance, waste collection and other services. At the height of the tourist season, it employs over 1,600 people – approximately 260 full-time and 1,400 seasonal.



While Niagara Parks provides many free attractions, including open access to the Horseshoe Falls, it is financially self-sufficient, relying on revenues from its riparian rights to the Niagara River as well as tourist-oriented attractions such as gift shops, golf courses, restaurants, paid attractions and parking lots in order to meet its mandate of protecting and enhancing one of Canada’s great geographical gifts without burden to the taxpayer.

WHY PROMOTE CYCLING?

Cycling is generally an affordable and healthy means of transportation which is enhanced by appropriate amenities and infrastructure. As such, it seems a natural fit with NPC's mission to protect the beauty of the Niagara River Corridor as well as to enhance its enjoyment for all.

Due to its mandate of financial self-sufficiency, NPC is always looking for sustainable ways to enhance the experience of tourists visiting Niagara Parks, while also looking for ways to attract new tourists. Cycle tourism is seen by NPC as a perfectly suited and environmentally sustainable niche market which needs further exploration.

Research in recent years has shown:

- Cyclists spend more money per occasion than those individuals arriving by vehicle.
- In 2010, some 84,000 cycle tourists visited Niagara Region, ranked third in Ontario behind Toronto (223,000 cycle tourists) and Ottawa (110,000 cycle tourists). In all, cycle tourism contributed \$104 million to the Ontario economy in 2010 (Transportation Options 2012).
- Cycle tourists staying one or more nights in Niagara spend an average \$148, excluding accommodation (Transportation Options 2012) while \$108 is the average spent by all Niagara cyclists when including day-trippers (Transportation Options 2010)¹.
- Bicycle tourists look for activities and sites of interest to visit along any trails or paths.
- Bicycling infrastructure is relatively inexpensive. Example, the cost of one bicycle parking spot is approximately five per cent the cost of building one car parking spot.
- Becoming bike-friendly can attract new customers as businesses that have followed this route have found up to one-third of their customers are now cyclists.

¹ Information collected by Bike Train and the Welcome Cyclists Network in 2010 showed a difference in the spending habits between Niagara cyclists that took the Bike Train into the region versus cyclists that came via their own private vehicles or other modes of transportation such as a plane or bus. Those who drove into the region and then cycled around tended to spend less on food and beverage, but more on paid attractions and retail purchases. Visit the websites on our references page for more detailed cycle tourism statistics.

THE NIAGARA RIVER RECREATION TRAIL

The Niagara River Recreation Trail is a 53-kilometre paved trail that runs alongside the scenic Niagara Parkway and Niagara River. It is used by pedestrians and cyclists and there are portions shared with motorized vehicles. There are more than 100 historic plaques and monuments along the route.

The trail is divided into four sections. Its northern point begins at Fort George in historic Niagara-on-the-Lake and winds its way towards Queenston Heights. The flat portion of the trail features historic spots, picnic areas, wineries and roadside farm stands. The ride culminates on one of the oldest roads in the province, up the escarpment to Brock's Monument at Queenston Heights.

Free parking and access to the public bus system, WEGO, begins at this park. The trail between Queenston Heights and the Whirlpool Aero Car features many of the famous Niagara Falls sites such as the Floral Clock, Botanical Gardens, Butterfly Conservatory and the Whirlpool Rapids. You are also able to detour from the trail – by foot – for a hike through the Niagara Glen and into the gorge.

The trail halts at the Whirlpool Aero Car and takes up again on the other side of the



Horseshoe Falls. There is a sidewalk that continues towards the Falls for those who choose to walk, or cyclists can take to the road, although it can get busy and is recommended only for the experienced cyclist. This is an admitted challenge to NPC's efforts in attracting cyclists to its most popular site – the Horseshoe Falls with all its amenities and activities. We will discuss this in a later section.

The third section continues from Chippawa to Black Creek and features the site of the Battle of Chippawa (War of 1812) and hiking along Black Creek. The fourth and final section continues into the Town of Fort Erie, ending at Historic Old Fort Erie. From there, cyclists can continue along the Friendship Trail into the community of Port Colborne and the Freedom Trail, a paved path situated along an abandoned railway line that makes up the southern portion of the Greater Niagara Circle Route.

BIKE FACILITIES AND AMENITIES

Bike Rentals: Based on feedback from cyclists, it was determined that a multi-location approach was needed for bike rentals in Niagara Parks. Through a competitive procurement process, Zoom Leisure Bike Tours and Rentals was selected to rent bikes at two locations along the Niagara River Recreation Trail. Starting the summer 2013, bike rentals are now being offered at the Whirlpool Aero Car parking lot and at Smugglers Cove, which is adjacent to McFarland House in Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Bike Racks: Bike racks are currently available at all NPC facilities for secured storage. Based on feedback from the local cycling community, it was suggested that it was time to replace NPC's aging fleet of bike racks. With the rising cost of bicycles, cyclists tend to avoid the old "wheel bender" style racks, which were common throughout the parks. This year, new bike racks were installed at various venues throughout the parks. Highly recommended by local cyclists, these new 'Inverted U' style racks provide safer storage options for cyclists and their bikes.

Washrooms: During the busy tourism season, generally May to September, washroom access is available at all NPC sites. Historically, many of these washrooms are closed during winter months; however Niagara Parks is now making an effort to keep washroom access available year-round at almost all NPC sites.



Refreshments: Refreshments are available at all NPC facilities during the summer months and at most sites in the off-season. Many NPC shops and restaurants also provide healthy snacks and local cuisine options for cyclists.

24-plus cycle-friendly locations: In the spring of 2012, NPC registered nearly all of its facilities, including attractions, gift shops, and restaurants, with the Welcome Cyclist Network. Through this network, NPC's facilities are promoted as being 'Cyclist Friendly' through paper and online maps along with attendance at trade shows. In order to be registered as cyclist friendly, a variety of items are required such as washroom access, bike storage/lock-up, access to refreshments, casual dress code, and healthy/local food options at NPC-owned restaurants. All NPC restaurants have a casual dress code.

Existing Signage: Currently, signage is limited along the recreational trail to a few trail head signs and road crossings. There is also limited signage through the Town of Queenston to direct cyclists back onto the trail. The pavement of the Rec trail has also been marked with distance measures to allow trail users to keep track of their distance travelled and location on the trail.

Niagara Bed & Breakfasts: Cycle & Stay Niagara is a network of 12 bike-friendly bed-and-breakfast accommodations located along the Greater Niagara Circle Route. They offer secure lock-up of bikes for guests and will transfer luggage between network members while its guests bike their way to each destination.

Bike Train: The Toronto-Niagara Greenbelt Express is provided by GO Transit during the summer months, departing Toronto Union Station and arriving at Niagara Falls Station with stops along the way. The train station in Niagara Falls is just one block from the Niagara River Recreation Trail. Heading north from the station will take you towards the Niagara Glen, Queenston Heights and Niagara-on-the-Lake. Heading south leads to the Horseshoe Falls, Chippawa and Fort Erie.



WEGO: WEGO is a state-of-the-art bus transit system that connects visitors to Niagara Parks attractions and other tourist areas in Niagara Falls. It is fully accessible and operates year-round. Each bus can transport two bicycles on front-mounted racks. Visitors can purchase a bus pass for either 24 hours or 48 hours. Updated information on

schedules, routes and fares can be found at www.niagaraparks.com/wego

Shuttle to Niagara-on-the-Lake: On June 23, 2013, NPC launched a new pilot daily summer shuttle service which travels along the Niagara Parkway from Queenston to Niagara-on-the-Lake. It runs every 90 minutes between the Floral Clock at Queenston to Fort George in the historic town, beginning at 10:15 p.m. The last shuttle leaves Fort George at 5 p.m. This service, which ends Sept. 1, was established partially in response to the requests of stakeholders along the northern route of the Parkway and will now allow cyclists to pedal north toward the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake and be shuttled back if they so desire.

CHALLENGES FACED BY NPC

One of the biggest challenges to NPC is how to get cyclists safely through the heavily travelled Falls-viewing area. Due to the linear nature of NPC's property, positioned between the Niagara River and neighbouring infrastructure, there is a limited opportunity to expand roads and trails beyond their existing locations. NPC's Table Rock complex, located next to the Horseshoe Falls, receives the highest amount of foot and automobile traffic. Nearly all of the available space in the vicinity is already being occupied or the existing infrastructure (above and below ground) does not permit for the expansion of roadways needed for bike lanes or the construction of new trails. Due to the current volume of automobile traffic, especially during the high season, closing down one of the existing lanes would not be feasible, as it would only create further traffic issues.



As part of NPC's mandate to protect and conserve natural areas and green space, there is also limited opportunity to expand the entire Niagara Parkway to accommodate the addition of bike lanes, which meet proper safety standards. Adding bike lanes along the entire 56km Niagara Parkway would also require a significant financial investment.

It has been suggested by stakeholders that a line be painted down the middle of the trail to enhance the flow of cycle and pedestrian traffic. When the trail was built in 1986, it was not built to today's needs and expectations. As a result, the trail is currently not wide enough to divide it with the use of a line down the middle as each side would be too narrow. While NPC is investigating widening options, it would require significant financial resources to widen the entire 53km trail. As the trail also currently runs through or close to significant natural areas, extensive mitigation would be required to limit the effects on the surrounding environment.

Signage: The Niagara River Recreation Trail is part of several regional, provincial, and federal trail networks, such as the Trans Canada Trail, Waterfront Trail, and Greater Niagara Circle Route. Having each of these trail networks install its own signage would result in significant 'sign pollution', which is why trail signage has been fairly limited to date. Fortunately, working with its existing trail partners, combined signage using each trail network's logo are in the process of being implemented and installed to meet the needs of everyone.

Kilometre markers have also been painted on the trails; however they represent the distance from the start of the Greater Niagara Circle Route in Fort Erie and not distance to the Falls. This is currently under consideration.

Available Resources: Currently, there are limited resources and financial opportunities to market Niagara as a cycling destination and to aid in trail and bike lane development. Tourism initiatives tend to focus on major events instead of ongoing projects such as becoming more bicycle-friendly (Stakeholder interviews 2013). The NPC would like to inform tourists of the many NPC options south and north of the Falls

Local Business Cooperation: Interviews within the cycling community have suggested that there tends to be a limited number of businesses in Niagara Falls that see the benefit of attracting cyclists. This may be due to restricted marketing resources or they simply are not aware of the financial benefit cyclists can bring to their business. Niagara Falls has been highlighted as lagging other Ontario cities in formal "bicycle friendly" status. In particular, it is difficult for cyclists to get from the city proper to the trails. The NPC has been meeting with adjoining

municipalities and their planners resulting in a growing awareness of the need for better cycling infrastructure.

Mountain Biking: There are currently no sanctioned mountain bike trails within Niagara Parks; however some individuals have developed small trails within NPC's natural areas. Due to ecological sensitivities (such as the Niagara Escarpment) and the added liability, further research on access to mountain biking opportunities is required.

LOOKING FORWARD

NPC aims to position its parks as a cycling destination. Use of the current trail system, the success of local cycling businesses and the recent GranFondo 125-km road tour, which attracted approximately 1,000 participants, all indicate the promise Niagara Parks holds for cycle tourism. NPC is currently using trail counters to identify the number of users, which will allow it to address priority areas and better manage its resources going forward. The NPC is encouraged to continue its work in the following areas:

- Signage on the trail needs improvement to indicate to users their exact location and distance from landmarks. New trail signs have been installed in the village of Queenston to assist trail users navigate through the town and back to the trail.
- There are rough areas of the trail that need repairing and parts that need widening, especially as it is a multi-use trail shared by both cyclists and pedestrians. Users have commented on the difficulty navigating the posts on NPC's trail bridges. The posts are there to keep motorized vehicles off of the bridges for safety reasons. While removing them is likely not an option, NPC will review how to make them more visible.
- In order for the trail to be of optimum cycle tourism use, it must safely continue between Rainbow Bridge and Chippawa. NPC is working with Niagara Region and the City of Niagara Falls on the best strategy for moving cyclists safely between Chippawa and the Rainbow Bridge. The Ontario Ministry of Transportation recently released its guide to cycling infrastructure, which should assist NPC in its approach.
- NPC is encouraged to continue its enhancements to WEGO and to promote continued and expanded shuttle services to and from both ends of the trail – Niagara-on-the-Lake to Fort Erie. Local stakeholders should also be lobbying for increased GO Train service to the Niagara Region in general as this will open up the region to more tourists from across southern Ontario.
- For the first time in several years, NPC has purchased advertising space on cycling promotional materials (Trail Map). It is also working to expand its cycling promotion on its website and will continue to attend cycling related trade shows, conferences, and workshops.

REFERENCES

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