

Scott Koblyk and Chris McLaughlin Thu Dec 20 2012 05:00:00 1 Comments 0 Recommend

Randle Reef resolution in sight

Solving the problem of Randle Reef has never been easy. Important, of course, but never easy.

It was difficult to admit this 60-hectare deposit of toxic sludge is part of our community. It was difficult to engineer a plan to deal with it. And it was difficult to assemble the coalition of funders and leaders that could take that plan and turn it into reality.

At every step of the way, however, our community, our governments, our stakeholders, and our citizens have persevered and pushed forward. On Tuesday, finally, we reached arguably the most significant single milestone in the timeline of the Randle Reef project to date.

Tuesday, Canada's Minister of the Environment announced the federal government's additional funding for Randle Reef that changed the project's status from partially funded to fully funded. From an optimistic yellow light to a committed green. The Government of Canada's pledge stands on the shoulders of earlier commitments from the Province of Ontario, City of Hamilton, City of Burlington, Halton Region, U.S. Steel and the Hamilton Port Authority. Each and every partner is an essential piece of the Randle Reef puzzle.

Together, these partners have assembled the considerable resources — funding, expertise, and labour — required to segregate from our local ecosystem the most contaminated toxic coal tar site in Canada.

When the engineered containment facility is complete and the area capped, we will have met one of the many criteria to have the Hamilton Harbour/Burlington Bay watershed delisted as an official Area of Concern on the Great Lakes. Second only to the improvements to the Woodward Wastewater Treatment Plant that are already under way, the Randle Reef project is the most significant project on our Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan (HHRAP) to-do list. So while containing the contaminated sediment at Randle Reef is absolutely critical and should be recognized as a huge community achievement, it will not push us across the delisting finish line on its own.

We still need to address a number of issues before we can apply to be removed from the Areas of Concern list. The Bay Area Restoration Council highlighted the progress on 17 of those issues earlier this year when we published our 2012 Toward Safe Harbours Report Card. Now that the momentum on Randle Reef is undeniably positive, our key concerns are things like beach closures, contaminant levels in fish and wildlife, erosion control, storm water management and urban sprawl.

We expect solutions on these challenges to be the products of processes similar to the one that has brought us to the verge of success with Randle Reef. The processes will involve private citizens and landowners, small businesses, industry, governments, agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and institutions from across our watershed. This is the model that has fuelled such great success on HHRAP goals like improving public access to the shores of the bay, enhancing fish and wildlife habitat, and encouraging water conservation.

The Hamilton-Burlington community has come a long way since the beginning of the Remedial Action Plan more than 20 years ago. In fact, we are now closer to the end of that process than we are to the beginning. Instead of measuring our improvement, those of us closely involved with the HHRAP are now looking forward at what's left to accomplish. We are looking at the finish line. It is still years and many thousands of hours of hard work away, but it is in sight. And Tuesday, it got a whole lot closer. If that feels like cause for celebration, it is. It is an opportunity to recognize the commitments and contributions of the lead partners. It is an opportunity for us to thank all of you — private citizens, stakeholders, and organizations — who helped create the public will that convinced our governments that supporting the Randle Reef project is a high community priority.

So we thank you. Tuesday's announcement was one of the most important interim steps to delisting Hamilton Harbour as an Area of Concern. And that event, when it comes, could be the greatest public relations coup our community has ever achieved, and a milestone that one study determined will be worth nearly \$1 billion in economic benefit for the region.

Well done, and let's keep up the good work.

Scott Koblyk is president, and Chris McLaughlin executive director, of the Bay Area Restoration Council, a nonprofit organization that represents the public interest in the revitalization of Hamilton Harbour and its watershed.



The Randle Reef area of Hamilton Harbour, which is severely contaminated and awaits cleanup.

Hamilton Spectator file photo