

## Seeking a new vision for Victoria's harbour

By Keith Norbury, Special to the Times Colonist August 24, 2010



Victoria Inner Harbour, circa 1959.

From his dock-level office in the Regent Hotel on the waterfront, Barry Hobbis enjoys a view that keeps him smiling. Hobbis is the vice-president of operations for Victoria Harbour Ferry and board member. He manages the company's day-to-day workings.

"I watch paddlers going out there every day, hundreds of paddlers, and I'm just delighted that they have a safe place to paddle and that's the north shore," Hobbis says as tourists in outrigger canoes paddle under the Johnson Street Bridge.

It's a sight Hobbis never dreamed of in the 1960s when he worked the greenchain of the B.C. Forest Products sawmill, now the site of the Glo Europub and Grill in the tony Selkirk waterfront development.

Hobbis, 62, left Victoria in 1967 to pursue a career in the RCMP and later in legal publishing. He returned in 1994 and a decade later took over management of the harbour ferries, which in 2010 are marking 20 years in business.

The growth of the fleet from two vessels to 15 signifies how the harbour has changed. In other ways, the harbour has hardly changed at all. Prime waterfront along Wharf Street sat vacant for half a century.

"I think the key word for the harbour is land use," says Yule Heibel, an art historian who has a keen interest in urban issues. "We're certainly underutilizing it in significant ways. I mean we have parking lots on the water. That's pretty unimaginative."

Like Hobbis, she grew up in Victoria but was away for decades, in her case to earn a PhD at Harvard and to teach at MIT. When she moved back in 2002, "I thought nothing has changed," says Heibel, who recently helped organize the counter-petition campaign against the City of Victoria's plan to replace the Johnson Street Bridge.

Transport Canada divides the harbour into four parts. The Outer Harbour extends from the Ogden Point breakwater to Shoal Point, while the Middle Harbour stretches from Shoal Point to a narrow passage between Laurel and Songhees points. The Inner Harbour curls from those points to the Johnson Street Bridge, and the Upper Harbour reaches from the bridge north to the Selkirk Trestle.

As recently as the 1960s, shipyards, sawmills, a paint factory, tank farms, fish plants, a grain terminal and other industries dominated all three harbours. Most of those operations are gone, replaced by hotels, condos, restaurants and commercial buildings.

Or, in some prominent examples, parking lots.

"Cars have the best view of the harbour," quips urban planner Gwyn Symmons of CitySpaces Consulting Ltd.

Originally from Manchester, England, Symmons came to Victoria via Ottawa in 1983. Since then, he has encountered so many plans, visions and proposals for the harbour that he jokes they could cover the entire harbour floor. Plans have included cylindrical towers at Ship Point, several schemes for property next to Wharf Street, including a spacious convention centre, and a grandiose Harbour Centre for the Performing Arts in 2001. Predating Symmons's arrival were a 1971 City Harbour Renewal Plan, a Fort Victoria Site Study in 1974, and a Belleville Development Plan in 1979.

In 2007, then-mayor Alan Lowe initiated a Belleville terminal mayor's task force report that is also beginning to collect dust.

"The problem at that time was the public realm being compromised by private ownership, and the only way to make it work was to look at extreme height and density on that site and that goes against all our planning principles," says Victoria's current mayor, Dean Fortin, a councillor at the time.

The Belleville lands aside, there's a strong consensus that the most underutilized property on the harbour is the Reid site, a spacious parking lot overlooking the harbour at the foot of Fort Street. It's actually called Enterprise Wharf, notes Ray Parks, CEO of the Provincial Capital Commission, which owns the property. It's nicknamed for Sandy Reid and his \$23-million proposal in the late 1960s to plunk highrises on the water. Debate raged for about five years before Reid scrapped his plans, journalist Jim Hume recounted in a 2007 Times Colonist article. In 1974, Dave Barrett's NDP government bought the site for \$1.7 million and froze development. It's still frozen.

In 1859, the Hudson's Bay company built its original warehouse there, notes local historian John Adams. All that remains of it is a two-storey rock wall that appears to support Wharf Street.

"In its day, it was the busiest dock in British Columbia, certainly until the 1880s," Adams says. The ancestors of today's Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations already had a presence in the harbour millennia before Capt. William Henry McNeill sailed the SS Beaver into it in 1837. The aboriginal people considered the harbour sacred, says University of Victoria professor John Lutz.

"First Nations used Songhees Point where they would hang the cradles of their infants on the trees on the point," Lutz says. "There was a spirit power there that would give the children a long life if their baskets hung up there."

Although Victoria harbour was inferior to Esquimalt's, James Douglas chose Victoria for a Hudson's Bay Company outpost in 1843 because of its proximity to the meadows of Beacon Hill and Fairfield, Lutz says. By the time it became obvious that those lands weren't too fertile, the fort was well established.

Victoria became the industrial engine of the region and its harbour flourished, its growth bolstered by the 1858 Fraser River gold rush. Then the federal government in 1886 broke its promise to make Victoria the western terminus of the transcontinental railway, instead ending the line at Port Moody, and later Vancouver.

Fast-forward to a 1940s aerial photo of the harbour, published in *Making the News: A Times Colonist Look at 150 Years of History*, to see beehive burners and log booms on the Upper Harbour. As recently as 1968, almost the entire harbour shoreline was marine industrial land. The subsequent deindustrialization wasn't unique to Victoria, Symmons points out.

"And Victoria also is part of the pattern of putting housing around what were previously vibrant harbours," Symmons says.

Maps accompanying a report released in July 2010 by the Greater Victoria Harbour Authority and the Victoria/Esquimalt Harbour Society show how the industrial lands have steadily shrunk since 1968. The report notes that the City of Victoria's 1995 official community plan defined Victoria's as a "working harbour" but that although "lip service was paid by developers to promises of a 'marine component,' few of these promises reached actualization."

Fortin says the city is updating its official community plan and taking those concerns into account.

"So the next couple of years we'll really engage our citizens to develop that grander, bigger vision, looking for those long-term sustainable pieces that move our harbour forward," Fortin says.

Like others, Fortin acknowledges that the patchwork of ownership and jurisdictions over the harbour poses huge challenges. The city, the Provincial Capital Commission, the harbour authority and Transport Canada are the major landowners.

"The original idea was to transfer all of the PCC waterfront properties, all of the city properties and all the federal properties to the harbour authority. And good waterfront management around the world has demonstrated you've got to consolidate the properties into one administration in order to do something with them," says Paul Servos, CEO of the harbour authority until his departure last week.

Not so fast, says Hobbis. The harbour authority is merely a landlord over several marinas, he says. Victoria MP Denise Savoie isn't keen, either, on the harbour authority exercising more control over the harbour.

"Basically, there is no accountability in that body," she says, noting that its board consists of unelected appointees.

Servos, though, says the harbour authority has a lot of accountability and its members include elected councillors from Victoria, Esquimalt, Oak Bay and Saanich.

Servos remains optimistic that within five to 10 years, the harbour authority will obtain jurisdiction over the entire harbour seabed. He would also like the authority to gain control

over commission lands on the harbour, including the Victoria Clipper terminal that Transport Canada divested to the Provincial Capital Commission.

"I don't care whether it goes to the city or to the harbour authority, but they have to go into local control of an organization that has a vision to maximize those properties for the community."

Servos blamed the commission for the sad state of the Clipper terminal, which in its waiting room has a prominent sign apologizing for its "inadequacies."

The commission's Parks says the Crown corporation upgraded the Coho terminal last year and the Clipper terminal "is being done as we speak."

And Parks offers a pointed "no" to the suggestion that the commission should give up its lands to the harbour authority.

The federal and provincial government are also paying \$3 million to upgrade the historic Canadian Pacific steamship terminal. During the renovations, U.S. Homeland Security is going to move into a construction trailer nearby.

While noting the trailer will be temporary, Fortin says, "Really, it is a canary in the coal mine that says we really need to start moving forward on a permanent vision that is going to allow us to develop the full potential of this harbour."

When the harbour authority was founded in 2002, it received \$12 million from the federal government to upgrade the properties it received from Transport Canada, such as the Ogden Point docks and Fisherman's Wharf, Servos says. Tim Webster, president of the Victoria Fisherman's Association, is pleased with the "great improvements" the harbour authority has made to Fisherman's Wharf.

"They've increased the dock space. They've been very willing to accommodate the fisherman," Webster says.

That's despite a dwindling fleet that now counts only a couple of dozen wintering boats.

"When I first started here, there were probably 150 to 200 boats in the winter," Webster says.

Shipyards have also all but vanished. The last one remaining is Point Hope Shipyard, and that's only because Ian Maxwell of the Ralmax Group of Companies rescued it from bankruptcy.

Since taking over Point Hope in 2004, Maxwell has sunk more than \$12 million into modernizing the shipyard, including a new marine railway, a new turntable, and a new pier.

Along freshly paved and curbed Harbour Road, which separates Point Hope from the Dockside Green residences, a glistening black chainlink fence runs the length of the shipyard. Near the south end, park benches face the dry dock and offer a view of the action. A plaque on the fence recounts a brief history of the shipyard, which dates to 1873.

"We recognized we have to be good neighbours," says Hans Bekkering, general manager of Point Hope Maritime from his waterfront office in the adjacent building of United Engineering Ltd., a sister company.

"Having said that, we are an industrial site, so there will be industrial stuff happening here."

The shipyard and United Engineering combined employ as many as 150 people, but that's a fraction of the 3,000 who worked for Victoria Machinery Depot shipyards during the Second World War. Still, Point Hope's workers average \$30 an hour, double or more what employees earn in the hotel, restaurant and service industries.

While supportive of the shipyard, Hobbis wonders if crushing gravel and mixing concrete will be acceptable harbour industries 25 years from now.

Butler Bros. Supplies Ltd. president Brian Butler, whose family business has operated on Rock Bay since the 1960s, says those who suggest the plant doesn't belong on the harbour "are ignorant people who don't understand the situation."

Concrete is time-sensitive and needs to be produced close to its market. "You are dealing with something of high value and great mass," Butler says. "And water is the only economical way of transporting it."

If history is any guide, Victoria's harbour will keep changing. So there's something to be said for enjoying it the way it is now, warts and all -- the way Palos Verdes, Calif., tourist Mary Jo Curwen does.

"It reminds me a little of Sydney harbour," Curwen says as she strolls with her husband, Colin Chiu, amid the float homes at Fisherman's Wharf.

"In Sydney they have the opera house. Here you have the Parliament buildings."

Adds her husband: "It's a working area. That's one thing I like about it."

CORRECTED: Information in this story has been corrected and appears differently than the print version. Barry Hobbis is the vice-president of operations and a board member of Victoria Harbour Ferry. The president is owner Nick Samson, the chair of the board is owner John Chew and John Heraghty is the third co-owner.

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