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Buffalo bets on

Once a symbol of American urban blight, the Lake Erie city has ambitious plans for its waterfront, backed by heavy dollops of federal and state funding. By Murray Whyte

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BUFFALO, N.Y.

If nothing else, Larry Quinn is an optimist. "You look out that window, what do you see?" he asks, pointing northward from his desk. "The natural geography – okay, maybe there's 10 places in the world more beautiful. So we're top 20. Period. That's an incredible asset."

To be clear: Quinn, the managing partner of the Buffalo Sabres, is in his office at the HSBC Center. On the waterfront. In *Buffalo*.






You'd be forgiven a double-take. In the annals of post-industrial urban disasters, Buffalo has long played the unwanted role of runner-up to Detroit, less a city now than a comprehensive metaphor for urban blight.

It wasn't an arbitrary distinction. Buffalo's mid-century heyday made it a thriving centre for industrial commerce, from steelmaking to grain milling to its role as a significant transport hub for goods coming and going along the Erie Canal, the historic waterway that linked New York City to the Great Lakes. It was also the way station for many of the country's pioneers, many of



DAVID COOPER/TORONTO STAR

The downtown Buffalo marina will soon be just part of a string of parks, beaches and commercial development where the Erie Canal meets the lake.

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Buffalo then and

'This city has been talking about waterfront redevelopment for 50 years or more'
Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown

whom passed through Buffalo's waterways on their journey to points unknown to settle the West.

But that, as they say, is history. Buffalo's maritime importance began to wane not long after the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in 1959 and by the 1970s, with Lake Erie reduced to a large-scale toxic cesspool, dozens of factories in the region closed, throwing unemployment rates to

near Depression-era heights. The city hollowed out. Its population plummeted from an historic high of roughly 600,000 to 358,000 by 1982. It sits at about 280,000 today.

It has been a precipitous fall from the city's mid-century nickname, the City of Lights, to the unofficial and widely popular slogan perpetuated by Buffalo artist Michael Margolis: "Buffalo: City of No Illusions."

But for Quinn, the volunteer vice-chair of the Erie Canal Harbor Development Corporation, that downward spiral can be history now, too. Just outside his window lies the Canal's terminus, a weighty symbol of a grand Buffalo past – and, in Quinn's view, a lifeline to the future.

As Toronto continues to creep steadily forward on its waterfront redevelopment plan – the master scheme for the foot of the Don River and Portlands, released just a month ago, is still several years away from starting – Buffalo has already begun building what it hopes will be the anchor of a reinvigorated waterfront.

Called Canalside, it builds on the site of the old Erie Canal terminus, complete with heritage designations, a marine museum and residential and commercial development. The first phases will open in August. What's more, the development, set at \$275 million (U.S.), has been pushed forward by a network of funding from federal, state and civic coffers totalling \$136.5 million, with the rest for retail, condos, a hotel and offices being courted from the private sector and expected to come online this year.

The canal, left dry for decades, has been refilled with water, with a mind to running pleasure boats in the inner harbour. A bowstring bridge, a revived fragment of Buffalo's lost past, will connect Canalside to the outer harbour where a residential district will line the Buffalo River, giving way to vast expanses of parkland and beaches reclaimed from the brown fields.

It's not the first time this has been tried, of course. Quinn remembers a plan hatched by the Adelpia Communications Corp. in 1999, with spindly white high-rises spiked evenly along the inner harbour. "It looked like Key Biscayne, Florida," he says with a smirk. "And that's just not Buffalo."

What is more Buffalo, perhaps, is that the plan fell apart, largely because Adelpia's top officials were indicted on fraud charges in 2002. It wasn't the first time a waterfront plan had vaporized, either. The Preservation Coalition of Erie County, a citizens' group, stalled waterfront development on the canal site in 1999 with a lawsuit that said the canal's historic integrity was being violated. ("Development by lawsuit is kind of a Buffalo rite," shrugs Chuck Rosenow, executive director of the ECHDC, and Quinn's colleague.)

What is also very Buffalo – and very Toronto, for that matter – is a deeply-ingrained sense that a flourishing waterfront is intrinsic the city's morale. Mayor Byron Brown acknowledged as much when he chose to spend his first day in office in January, 2006, touring the inner harbour

now:

1960

Population: 532,759

Major employers:
Bethlehem Steel, General Mills, Pillsbury

TODAY

Population: 279,745*

Major employers: HSBC Bank, Kaleida Health

"This city has been talking about waterfront redevelopment for 50 years or more," says Brown, in his office at Buffalo City Hall, a stately 1932 Art Deco skyscraper clad in limestone and terra cotta. "It's been frustrating. But we really do feel like we're on the rise again."

A mural in the city hall's grand entrance proclaims Buffalo to be the "Queen City" – ruler of the Great Lakes. It has been a long time since that was true. Abandoned warehouses and saloons throughout Buffalo's sprawling 1,497 hectares (3,700 acres) of portlands have long-since been razed, giving way to expanses of long lake grasses and rubble.

At the Swannie House, a century-old bar built for dockworkers – one of the few that survived – Chris Hirestetter, bear-like and garrulous, remembers the bad old days.

"I'd park my car down here and the paint would peel off," he recalls, sipping a pint of Rolling Rock beer. "Thirty years ago, you wouldn't believe the pollution. I'd pick my buddies up at the steel mill at midnight, and you can't even believe what they'd dump in the lake when no one was looking."

It's not like that now. Lake Erie's toxic past is but an ugly memory, its water now deemed fit for swimming and sport-fishing. Mid-afternoon on a warm spring day, a faint, sweet stench hangs in the air – baking Cheerios at the General Mills plant, one of the few active industrial sites left. Along the channel, the husks of old factories, their windows blown out, loom ghostlike in a gauzy shroud.

Hirestetter has heard all the grand plans. He sips his beer and shakes his head. "I've been coming down here for 30 years, and nothing's changed," he says. "And nothing is going to change, either, because they can't line enough pockets."

He can be forgiven his cynicism. Buffalonians, like Torontonians, have been waiting a long time for something, anything, to happen on their waterfront. The mayor, though, insists that this time it's different.

For one, there's the \$200 million (U.S.) from a re-licensing settlement with the New York Power Authority that's now being funnelled into the waterfront. Coupled with federal and state support, large portions of waterfront are already being reclaimed for parks and recreation, while residential developments in the historic Cobblestone district are well underway.

In all, more than \$1 billion has already been committed to the waterfront over the next five to 10 years in an array of projects large and small.

"There's no question, it languished for a long, long time," the mayor says. "The city was looking for mega-projects, the home run. It was looking for the silver bullet that, in one fell swoop, would completely transform the waterfront, and the fortunes of this community. And it just didn't happen.

"Now, finally, we have the resources to jump-start waterfront development, and it's moving forward aggressively."

A little too aggressively for some. Canalside may be well-financed, but it remains contentious to a raft of citizens' groups who complain that the development is a sell-out of the city's history for commercialization.

In the proposed development, Bass Pro, a major retailer of sport-fishing and boating equipment, is slated to be the anchor tenant at Canalside's waterfront. ("If we've been criticized, I guess it's because we're not as public-input friendly as some people would like us to be," Quinn shrugs.)

At a symposium in Buffalo last week, Chris Glaisek, Toronto Waterfront's vice-president for planning and design, had a ringside seat to the ongoing battle.

"I didn't know much about Toronto's waterfront and how people had been talking about each other," says Glaisek.

who was invited as a keynote speaker to outline Toronto's waterfront projects.

"It just goes to show you that there's controversy about waterfront development everywhere," he sighs. "It's endemic in this era."

Toronto has had no shortage of controversy concerning its vast waterfront plans, the most recent of which being the announced construction of a series of condominium towers on the site of former Marine Terminal 27, at the foot of Yonge Street.

But where Toronto's problem tends to be too much capital and too many developers vying for too few sites, the issue in Buffalo is just the opposite.

Economic devastation left much of downtown desolate.

Buildings emptied out and were left to rot. Many – too many, hindsight suggests – were razed, like Frank Lloyd Wright's historic Larkin Building. As recently as two years ago, Main Street, once the city's thriving urban stroll, was a jumble of empty office buildings and rubble fields.

"It was bombed out," says Tim Wanamaker, the executive director of the city's strategic planning office. "Full of vacant buildings. It was very, very depressed."

But quickly, that's changed. As the city has lured a clutch of health-care giants, the makeover of downtown – a veritable museum of American architecture with a park system by Frederic Law Olmsted and buildings by Wright and Louis Sullivan, among others – is well underway. The massive Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus has helped anchor a rejuvenation that has seen dozens of heritage restorations underway all over downtown, whether as retrofit condominiums or office space. And a new office tower – Buffalo's first in 20 years – is now under construction as well.

One young developer from Manchester, U.K., bought the Statler Building, once a stately, 1,100-room downtown hotel that has become a mostly-vacant office building. He plans to put \$80 million into restoring it to its former glory.

But all is not rosy. At least, not yet.

Robert Shibley is the director of the University of Buffalo's Urban Design Project. The city's wounds may have been cauterized, he says, but it's not done bleeding. "We're still losing population. We have a huge infrastructure of vacant land and weak neighbourhoods. And the demographics aren't great."

Shibley was courted from Oregon in 1982, when Buffalo was bottoming out. "The pitch to me was to come here because it has every problem in the world you'd ever want to study. It's small enough to get your arms around and you're only an hour and a half from Toronto," he laughs.

"Every day you'd pick up the paper and there'd be another insurance fire on the east side. We were losing housing stock, and population, very, very quickly. It was grim. It was very grim. But at the same time, it was challenging."

Shibley has been an important voice in the city's incremental revival. He was a key figure in creating the Queen City Hub Plan in 1999, which called for a \$1 billion investment by 2010 in five strategic areas. The waterfront was one of them. The team reached that amount of pledged funding by late last year, split about 60/40 between public and private.

"But I really believe this city is pregnant, and ready to deliver," he says. "And to be part of a renaissance like this is just hugely satisfying."

He's surrounded by aerial images and maps of the Niagara region, of which he's made an earnest

study for 25 years. And while he's yet to give his wholehearted support to Canalside, he's encouraged by the forward motion.

"I'm not quite ready to make it the silver bullet," he says, smiling. "But it's an important next priority. You look at the mix of activities on that waterfront, and you have to say `of course.'"

Canalside is not out of the woods. Recent changes to the plan raised the ire of community groups, and talk of another lawsuit is in the air.

But Quinn, it can be fairly said, is an optimist. On an otherwise-brilliant morning – his Sabres having just lost to the Senators – Quinn plays tour guide along the waterfront's eastern edge, where a collection of abandoned concrete grain elevators looms out of the icy spring water, towering over a collection of clapboard homes adjacent to a small lagoon. Concrete Alley, Quinn calls it. "It's not the pyramids," he says. "But it's pretty impressive."

Built just after the turn of the century, the elevators stored grain until it was ready to be loaded onto ships for points east and overseas. They're monuments to the past, but also a harbinger of a brighter future. A local group, RiverWright Energy, recently won approval to convert at least one of the silos into an \$80-million ethanol plant. More jobs, more activity, more hope. On a small landing facing the silos, two men cast lines into the water. A lake trout, still young, is hauled to land within moments.

"Clean enough to drink," chuckles another man, squat and balding, missing a few teeth. He's a former iron worker, he says, retired now, at 79. Buffalo, past and future, are different places, he says. Like any Buffalonian, he's equals parts optimist and cynic. "Once they start that waterfront ...," he begins, and folds his arms, shaking his head. "But you probably won't hear anything about that for another 20 years."

"Nah," says Quinn smiling, eyeing the elevators, sunlight bouncing off the sparkling waters to dance on their concrete girth. "It'll happen. You watch."

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