

Miltown makeover

The closure of Domtar and other mills has helped turn Cornwall from a smelly industrial city, to a place 'full of possibilities'

Explorers navigated the St. Lawrence River on their trek into the heart of a continent. Fur traders used it to open Canada's first industry, followed by loggers and fishermen. After the American Revolution, soldiers and civilians loyal to the Crown settled on the river's banks and built Johnstown, later renamed Cornwall and, over the next century, it became one of Canada's pre-eminent industrial centres.

But the city's mill-driven employment core has crumbled in the past 15 years, and Cornwall officials are looking elsewhere to achieve prosperity. Take a look at that plan, though, and you'll see the St. Lawrence remains, a common thread that ties the past to the future.



Mayor Bob Kilger woke one snowy November (2007) morning to what has become all-too-familiar news. Another plant was laying off staff; another 180 people were being thrown out of their jobs.

This time it was Satisfied Brakes, an auto-parts maker, hobbled by sagging car sales and a soaring dollar. Coming on the heels of the 2006 announcement that the historic Domtar paper mill was closing, with the loss of its last 910 staff, you might have thought it would be another huge blow.


But Cornwall is a city experienced in handling news of layoffs and plant closings. And paradoxically, despite the loss of 5,000 manufacturing jobs since the early 1990s — mostly in paper and textile-related industries — today there is a sense of optimism Mr. Kilger believes to be unequalled in the city's modern-day history.

For years, Domtar's unpleasant smell had formed visitors' first impression of the Seaway City when they arrived either over the international bridge, or down Brookdale Avenue — the main entry point from Highway 401. When Domtar Corp. closed its plant, the air began to clear — literally — over Cornwall's future.

What's more, the federal government plans, over the next five years, to replace the iconic high-level bridge that looms over the city like a giant Meccano toy. In its stead will be a low-profile structure that will open up usable space now wasted on the bridge approach.

Last September, the city's economic development department unveiled a new logo and slogan it hopes will reflect the opportunities seen in a future where big factories are no longer king. Cornwall, says the logo, is "a city with a world of possibilities." The plan takes a new approach to prosperity: attracting new industry, retirees, tourists and young working families looking for less expensive housing than they can find in Ottawa and Montreal.





Montreal industrialists were building woolen and textile mills in Cornwall by the mid-nineteenth century. In the early 1880s, the Toronto Paper Company constructed its first mill and, in 1882, Canada Cottons erected the largest weave shed in the world, illuminated by Thomas Edison's new invention. When the lights went on two years later, Cornwall became the first place in the world in which industry used electric power. Guests invited for the event were "electrified and bedazzled," according to a Toronto newspaper. Cornwall quickly became Canada's pre-eminent factory town.

Traditionally, factories hug the waterways for power and transportation. And like many Ontario communities, Cornwall's waterfront presented an industrial face when the St. Lawrence Seaway and Power Project opened in 1959. At the upriver, or west side of town sat the 50-hectare Domtar property. The Cornwall Canal, built in the 1830s and '40s to bypass rapids, ran parallel to the north channel of the St. Lawrence, through the downtown, to where the cotton and textile mills sat downriver to the east.

Estelle Benoit and Simone Kearns remember when the mills drove the economy. Mrs. Benoit spent five years at rayon fibre-maker Courtaulds from the late 1940s; Mrs. Kearns worked there for 27 years, beginning in 1947.

"We worked together there and ended up being sisters-in-law," says Mrs. Benoit. "This was a real mill town, and now there's nothing of it left. In the old days, people expected to work (in the mills) until they retired, or died. You had a house and a car and you knew you were going to be able to pay for it."

The mills were like family, adds Mrs. Kearns. Co-workers played together on the company softball, hockey, golf and tennis teams. Fathers obtained jobs in the mills and their children followed. Mrs. Kearns' and Mrs. Benoit's fathers both worked at the cotton mills. Three of Mrs. Kearns' sisters worked at Courtaulds and another worked for a Cornwall clothing manufacturer.


But by the 1990s, Canada's traditional manufacturing sector was in unstoppable retreat, taking Cornwall with it. Courtaulds shut its doors. Other textile and clothing manufacturers began to lay off workers and later close down. And Domtar announced periodic layoffs before finally closing. The unemployment rate peaked at 11 per cent.



David Foot is a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, who in 1996 wrote the book, *Boom, Bust and Echo*. Mr. Foot uses demographics to predict future trends. The shrinking pool of younger people and the rise of the aging baby boomer generation would have significant implications for Canada's economic and social life, he wrote. In 1997, at the height of hard times, a group of Cornwall businesspeople invited Mr. Foot to speak to them about their city's future.

Despite the changing economy, "they were still relying on the mills for their revenues," Mr. Foot recalled in a recent interview. "They were just tweaking at the edges" of the economy.

A decade ago, Mr. Foot told his audience his research showed the future was in the service economy: finan-



cial services, health care, tourism, education. You can no longer rely on the mills, he told them. Seize the opportunity.

Chuck Charlebois took the challenge. He is a proud booster of his east-end community, Le Village, who formed the Renaissance Group, a grassroots social advocacy organization of businesspeople and residents that sprang up from the then-depressed Village in 1998.

Renaissance held four public sessions to hear Le Village residents' and businessmen's beefs and ideas. The last one was held in a tent in a park. Children in the old riverside community were interviewed and one of the ideas that came out of the session was to paint the teeter-totters so the kids would stop getting slivers in their fannies. On a larger scale, storefronts and homes were renovated.



*The Renaissance Group's Chuck Charlebois reviews proposals for the former Domtar property
Photo by Gary May*

Through Mr. Charlebois, McGill University professor, architect and planner Avi Friedman was welcomed in to join forces for the Village project. In 2002, their work was recognized by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture in Washington, for rehabilitating the neighbourhood into a sustainable community.


Renaissance's value has been in sparking debate by throwing out ideas. It has obtained government grants to draw up designs that show city officials, property owners and developers what could be done with empty and dilapidated buildings. More recently, it has jump-started a key brownfields waterfront project — Cotton Mill Lofts condominiums.

Through the economic hardship, Cornwall's population remained stable at about 47,000. Yet the city changed. As in other like-sized communities, young people left and were replaced by older workers and retirees. Between 1996 and 2006, the average age rose to 43 from 37.5 years.

As the big mills closed, smaller manufacturers arrived. But the economy diversified. With Cornwall's proximity to Toronto and Montreal came new employers in the logistics and distribution sector — led by Supply Chain Management, Eastern Canada distributor for Wal-Mart — warehousing, trucking, auto parts and secondary services, technology, software and plastics, as well as call centres. While some of the new jobs paid less than the mills, unemployment fell and is currently about six per cent.

Mr. Foot received another invitation from community and business leaders to return last November and talk about what had changed in the intervening years. The loss of its mill base was a huge shock to the community, he told his audience, but it opened new prospects.

"Nobody wants the loss of good-paying (manufacturing) jobs," says Mr. Foot, "but it's a reality. You have to take that reality and turn it into an opportunity."



In the years since his previous visit, the city had rebuilt its hospital and added an aquatic centre. St. Lawrence College partnered with Laurentian University to offer a bachelor's program in nursing, and there are plans for one in business. There's a growing theatre and arts community. Now, a proposed multi-pad arena is tied to brownfields redevelopment plans that could provide new life to an old factory site.

Mr. Foot described for his audience a national trend: Twentysomethings leave smaller communities in search of jobs and exciting lives in larger cities such as Toronto and Montreal. When they settle down and look for affordable places to raise their families, they compare real estate prices. As they grow older, they look for quiet, pleasant places offering the health services they need and recreation opportunities they crave. Cornwall could market itself as both an affordable alternative for families and a retirement community, Mr. Foot said.

The city agrees. The new branding exercise is already under way, with radio ads touting its fresh air, its river and recreation, its small-town atmosphere, its services, light industry and less expensive housing. On a new website, chooscornwall.ca, visitors are invited to compare how far their real estate dollar will stretch in Ottawa and Cornwall by viewing photos of comparable homes. One example shows two similar bungalows, Ottawa's selling for \$219,900, while the Cornwall home is priced at \$129,800.

And if anyone has the perception that Cornwall is isolated, the city is ready to fight back. When someone asks about its proximity to an international airport, says Mark Boileau, the city's economic development manager, "I'll tell them about Dorval and Ottawa. I can get to Dorval in 50 minutes. A person living in Scarborough can't get to Pearson (Airport) as quickly."



The downtown portion of the Cornwall Canal was filled in during the 1970s and, over time, replaced by greenspace, gardens, a civic complex, bicycle and walking trails. Facing the parkland and the river beyond, old buildings were demolished and apartments and condominiums were built in recent years.

Mr. Kilger, the mayor, points out that in contrast to the heavy private ownership that defines the waterfronts of Brockville and Kingston, much of Cornwall's remains in public hands. "We've chosen a more virgin type of water development, with greater accessibility and openness. We'll be able to foster more economic growth along the water, but maintain the integrity of the core park area," he says.

Mr. Boileau adds: "People say we've done a tremendous job with our waterfront — don't do things otherwise. People say that's what Toronto should have done, but they allowed full commercial development, instead."

But just beyond the core, the shuttered textile mills left derelict buildings downriver to the east of the core; when Domtar began scaling back, it left more eyesores upriver to the west. The city's planners decided that if the mills were going to abandon the riverfront, they might as well find a new use for it. In the past, the mighty St. Lawrence had been the engine that drove commerce and industry. This time, it would be put to work for the city.



James Murphy is project manager and lead designer for R.M.P. Construction of Prescott on the Cotton Mill Lofts project in Le Village. He says Renaissance's Mr. Charlebois approached R.M.P. owner Bob Pelda about three years ago to put together a team consisting of the city, the builder, Renaissance and the textile mill property owners, Bill and Tom Kaneb.

The old red brick building looks like something you'd find in Toronto's factory district. Plans are for 16 condos, ranging up to 1,600 square feet, on each of three floors of the five-storey building, with nine-foot ceilings, plus parking and, potentially, eight more units, on the lower two floors. Arched windows will reveal the St. Lawrence and, on a clear day, New York's Adirondack Mountains. The roof will feature a common terrace.

"I think the best thing that ever happened to Cornwall is Domtar closing," Mr. Murphy says. "Don't be surprised in the next 10 to 15 years if the waterfront doesn't take a huge jump. It's a very proactive council." R.M.P. plans to begin marketing the condos in February and construction could begin by summer, he says.

Renaissance spread its wings beyond Le Village and has a plan for the Domtar property, too. Debate promises to be heated and prolonged, but the payoff for Cornwall could be enormous.

"These lots are going to be the (ital) address for the region and will draw people to the waterfront for years," enthuses Mr. Charlebois as he looks over concept drawings featuring housing and boat slips, a rowing club, trails, parkland, wind turbines and solar-panel heating, along what remains of the old Cornwall Canal.

"I love this place," he says of his hometown. "I'm an anything's-possible-type guy. Don't tell me it can't be done."

In an office on the Domtar property, across town from Mr. Charlebois' east-end office, Ray Lalonde smiles when asked about the Renaissance Group's plan. Mr. Lalonde and his colleagues have their own ideas for the Domtar land.

He is treasurer for the Cornwall company, Paris Holdings, led by contractor Gerry Rose, that was formed to purchase the Domtar lands for \$4 million, sell off the equipment and clean up the property. Once that's done, says Mr. Lalonde, "we want to carry on with this project." Paris has hired Daniel Paquette of Paquette Planning Associates Ltd. in Ottawa, to draw up its own vision.

Paris, an acronym for Property Asset Recovery Industrial Surplus, envisions retail, commercial and residential development. The company welcomes replacing the international bridge with a street-level structure, says Mr. Lalonde, because it will open up the west side of Brookdale Avenue for commercial use.



The former Domtar paper mill site offers interesting possibilities for housing and recreational lands.

Photo by Gary May

In the short term — maybe even by summer — Mr. Lalonde hopes they can build commercial/retail on the north side of Second Street. It would be a good spot for the city's multi-pad arena, too, he says.

Paris hopes to have a long-term plan for the lands in about a year. Two or three existing buildings could be saved and converted for a hotel and possible condo developments.

Just how ambitious the project is, and its timing, will depend on the local economy, says Mr. Lalonde. "When we finally announced we were buying the property, my daughter said, 'Dad, do you realize you're going to change the history of Cornwall,'" he smiles proudly. "This is a huge opportunity."



*Ray Lalonde oversees demolition and decommissioning of the former Domtar site.
Photo by Gary May*



The strength of that economy will depend in part on the success of the city's rebranding effort. While employment has increased, many of the new jobs are lower-paying than those lost, says Tom Gosling, 53, who worked at Domtar for 21 years. Still, many of those laid off wanted to stay in the city.


Mr. Gosling plans to help some of the older workers do just that. He's in the self-assisted employment program at St. Lawrence College and hopes to establish a company that employs ex-factory workers as temporary and home-handyman workers.

"Before Christmas, I had a call from a woman who'd called three roofers and two plumbers and none of them showed up," says Mr. Gosling. "I, myself, couldn't get an electrician. There's a real need for temporary workers."

His service would help older workers seeking part-time employment, but there's little incentive for younger people to stay in Cornwall, he says. He wishes the city well in its efforts to attract seniors and commuters. But he says he tried the commute to Ottawa for three years after losing his Cornwall job, and wouldn't want to do it again.

Stephen Summers believes downtown businesspeople are on-side with the campaign, and he's already seen evidence of the city's changing population. The owner of Melody Music Centre on Pitt Street says "there are always people hoping to draw more industry to town," but believes opportunities lie in attracting older people and commuters.

Among Mr. Summers' new clients is a man who moved from Montreal where he still works for a company that sells musical instruments. As well as commuters, "I'm getting a lot of new business from retired people who have moved here, too," he says.



Richard Kennealy has some advice on attracting retirees. Mr. Kennealy is general manager of Elliot Lake Retirement Living, the corporation that helped brand the Northern Ontario town as Canada's retirement capital.

"Ensure your product is well-defined, differentiate it from the competition, then sell like heck," says Mr. Kennealy.

In 1989-90, two mines employed 4,500 people in Elliot Lake, then a town of 15,000. With the loss of 95 per cent of those jobs within two years, Elliot Lake seemed destined to become a ghost town. While there were models in the United States, no Canadian community had engaged in a concerted effort to redefine itself as a retirement centre, Mr. Kennealy says. Marketing concentrated on offering value and a natural environment.

It struck a chord. The town now has a population of 11,500 and nearly 98 per cent of existing housing stock is occupied. Of Elliot Lake's total income of \$260 million a year, up to \$110 million is pension income, says Mr. Kennealy. More than one-quarter of the population is over the age of 65 (the Ontario average is 13 per cent) and another 30 per cent is aged 45 to 64 (compared to the provincial average of 23 per cent.)

The former Ottawa resident believes Cornwall is well-suited to attract retirees, tourists and commuters seeking lower-priced homes. The trio hold "some synergy," he believes. His most important piece of advice? "You must be committed over time. If you think you're going to turn yourself around in 12 or 24 months, you're being a wee bit optimistic. It takes a lot of educating to change your image."

When Cornwall's senior development officer, Bob Peters, returned from the December Property Management Exposition in Toronto, he reported more than 20 "strong leads" from businessmen, families and the 50-plus interested in a move to Cornwall. He says many were attracted by a huge aerial photo of the city, showing the river and greenspace.

If Cornwall is to be successful in rebranding itself, it seems the St. Lawrence will prove to be its lifeline again.

Article and photos by Gary May (www.GaryMay.ca).

First published in the Ottawa Citizen Sunday, January 27, 2008.

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