

Marinas, Fishing Vessels and Shipyards: Lunenburg Fights To Preserve Its Waterfront

by Don Procter

Lunenburg, with its brightly coloured 19th century wood buildings tucked neatly on steep hills running down to the shores of the Atlantic, is postcard perfect.

But Lunenburg is more than one of Canada's historic gems (it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995) — it boasts a close-knit relationship between tourism and fishery-based commerce that has existed for many years.

While Lunenburg has long been a draw for tourists it has even longer been a magnet for fishery and other marine industries because of its sheltered harbour. Potential changes to the harbour, however, could radically alter not only the look of Lunenburg, but also the economic forces that support it.

Clearwater Seafood Limited Partnership announced it was closing its waterfront scallop operations, which occupied almost two-thirds of Lunenburg's prime waterfront. The company began winding down operations in December of 2003 and in mid-January, 2006 the 24 mostly historic buildings and eight wharves, many of which are 19th century emblems of the quaint seaport, went silent.

Clearwater's announcement came as a shock to the community. More than 300 jobs had already been lost or displaced because of changes at the company in the past few years. Its outright departure signalled the loss of at least \$20 million annually to the region. With major maritime fishery industries dying, many Lunenburgers question what's next for their waterfront, fearing pricey condominium developments for seasonal residents as a likely but worst-case scenario.

Apart from the unsettling physical changes that upscale residential development might bring to the seaport, a condo craze would push up property values and force many long-term residents to pull up roots and head for less expensive locations. It is a scenario that has shaped the future of a number of small Atlantic waterfront communities.

"That would change the dynamics and demographics of the community. It would place our schools and hospitals at risk because we wouldn't have the year-round population but we would still have to maintain a community with year-round municipal services," explains Mayor Laurence Mawhinney. But Lunenburgers aren't about to give up their waterfront easily. The town council set up the Lunenburg Waterfront Futures Committee to examine what to do with the vacated buildings and wharves. The group, comprised of citizens at large plus those with businesses on the waterfront, commissioned O'Halloran Campbell Consultants Ltd. of Halifax to begin a master plan of the town's waterfront. The plan's first phase concluded that the best economic use for the waterfront and for the town overall was one geared to marine businesses such as fisheries, boat building and servicing.

Maintaining an historic "working waterfront" is in keeping with the views of a community group known as the Lunenburg Waterfront Association Inc.(LWAI), a non-profit group formed to acquire the property once operated



View of Lunenburg's historic waterfront. The town was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995.



The oversized dormer window is affectionately known as the "Lunenburg bump."

by Clearwater. "We want it to remain a working waterfront because it is the economic engine of the community," explains Jim Eisenhauer, president of LWAI.

Building condominium clusters on the shoreline might attract wealthy Americans, out-of-province Canadians and Haligonians looking for seasonal homes but "it would be the death of this community as we know it, hastening a move to a seasonal community," adds Mr. Eisenhauer.

Also rejected by the town was a tourism-g geared development because tourism is only a three- to four-month industry with a shoulder season of a few weeks, he points out. "We'd more than welcome tourists wanting to come and see us for our working waterfront. To me it is the ideal plan and strategy for the long-term future and health of the community." Many residents agree.

To put its plan into gear, however, the LWAI first had to acquire the buildings. In August, after a period of failed negotiations with prospective buyers, Clearwater agreed to sell the land to the provincial government's Waterfront Development Corporation for \$5.5 million. The \$5.5 million is only a provincial loan, however. Terms of the loan have yet to be determined.

The province stepped in with the money to ensure that the land wasn't sold to questionable developers. Once the town's business plan is in place, the property deed will be transferred to the LWAI.

While many of the larger traditional fisheries in the Atlantic region are dead or dying, Lunenburgers like Eisenhauer and Mawhinney see a niche for them in maintaining the port. "I think a lot of the feeling is that much of the history and heritage of Lunenburg is derived from our location on the water," says the mayor, adding the working waterfront has always given the town its "reason for being. The waterfront businesses provided the living, the next streets over provided the commerce and the residences on the hill provided homes for the workers."

Mr. Mawhinney says the goal is to attract businesses that will make the waterfront even busier than it has been. "(We want) to have the movement of vessels in and out, fishing and other forms of coastal trade, tall ships involved in training young people, marinas that can service small vessels and a shipyard that can service larger boats and tall ships. These traditional skills are all here. We want to build on that."

Additional waterfront uses might be educational facilities such as marine science and research institutes, which would provide year-round jobs and help maintain the community's economic stability, says Mawhinney the mayor.

The first step is to resell and or lease the 24 buildings and eight wharves. While most of the wharves are structurally sound, some of the buildings will require significant work. Campbell O'Halloran did a preliminary condition report and an in-depth condition assessment is under way by the firm.

"None of us is so naive to think that all the buildings will be used for working waterfront activities, but if we can get the core tenants or owners then we believe we'll have a viable business plan," says Mr. Eisenhauer.

The first step towards that goal came in October when a new fishing vessel built in Norway chose to make Lunenburg's port home, he says. The 126-foot Julianne III and her owner Lunar Fishing (Nova Scotia) Inc. will become a tenant at what formerly was Clearwater's Deep Sea Trawlers property. Lunar Fishing will use Lunenburg as its base of operations along with its sister company Lunar Fishing (New Brunswick) Inc.

"This is a turnaround for the waterfront, for it is a return to an old calling — 'going to sea' — with new technology and a brand new vessel," adds Mawhinney. "It is most encouraging to see it happen after all the hard work that the community has put into making the working waterfront work."

A number of businesses that don't require waterfront have also expressed interest in setting up shop. These range from vessel brokerages to grocery stores.

Any new development will have to comply with the town's heritage bylaw. In 1992 Lunenburg was designated a national heritage district and the town became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995. To complement the UNESCO designation, Lunenburg went through a five-year process to establish a set of heritage guidelines. Those guidelines prohibit the use of building materials such as vinyl siding. Even the colour of paint used on facades must meet with the town's approval.

The heritage rules may scare off some developers. The mayor points out, however, that the marine industrial zoning along the waterfront permits traditional and new marine uses, ranging from fisheries to marine academic institutes. The zoning also allows for some services, such as restaurants. "We're not trying to freeze the waterfront in time. We want to see it evolve as a viable working waterfront."

Mr. Eisenhauer is encouraged by conversations he's had with prospective businesses.

"They are attracted by the fact that we want to protect the feel, flavour and the appearance. We want to prevent a situation like that of a pig farmer who has people from the city move next door and five years later they are objecting to the noise and the smell of the pig farm. Guess who goes? That's not the way we want Lunenburg to be."

Lunenburg officials have talked with other eastern seaboard communities in Canada and the United States about their waterfront development experiences, but LWAI believes none show as much potential to control their destiny as Lunenburg.

"I'm encouraged at this point that there are fairly significant opportunities for us in the short term," says Mr. Eisenhauer, adding that realistically it will take about five years to fully redevelop the site. "If we are successful, I think we'll have a healthier waterfront than two years ago when we had all our eggs in one basket. We will have a good model of redevelopment for waterfronts that other communities in this province and country can emulate."

Don Procter is a freelance writer who is passionate about historic buildings.