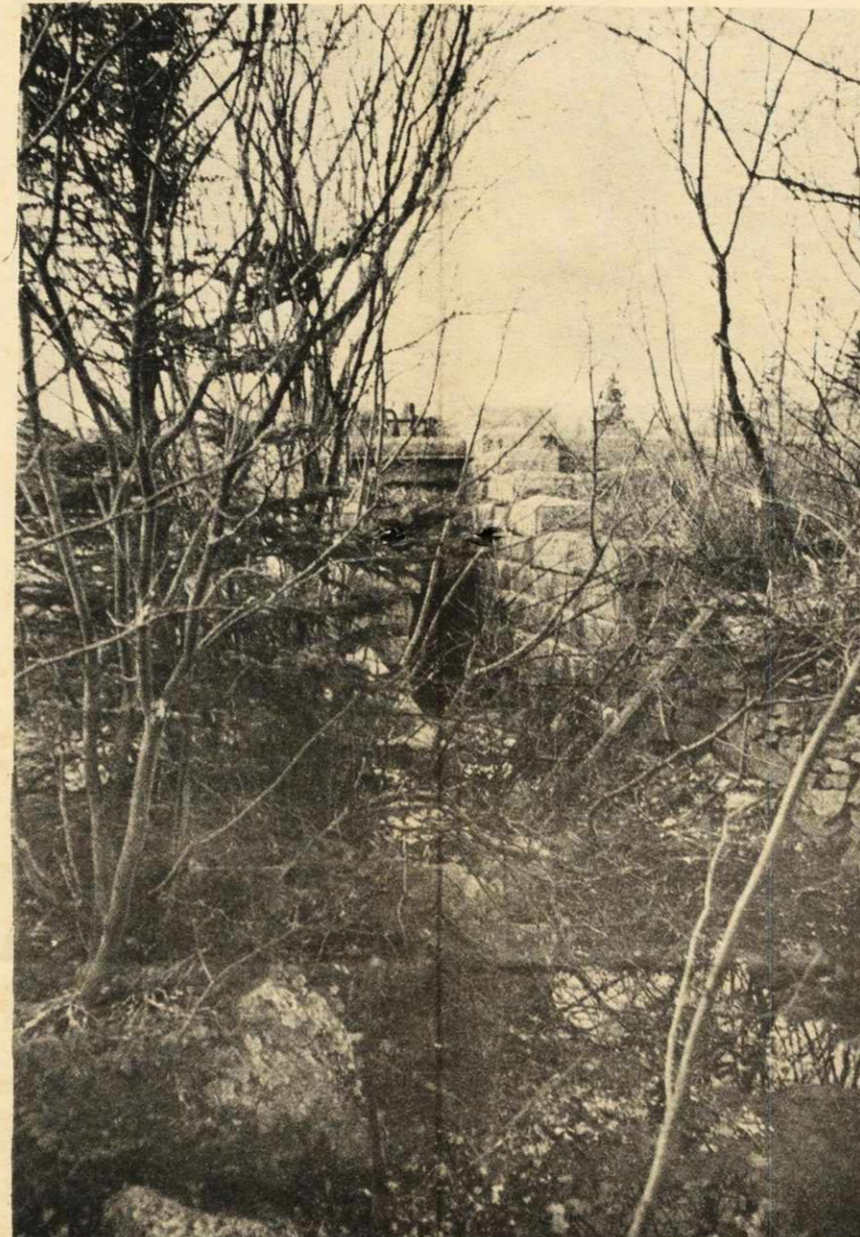
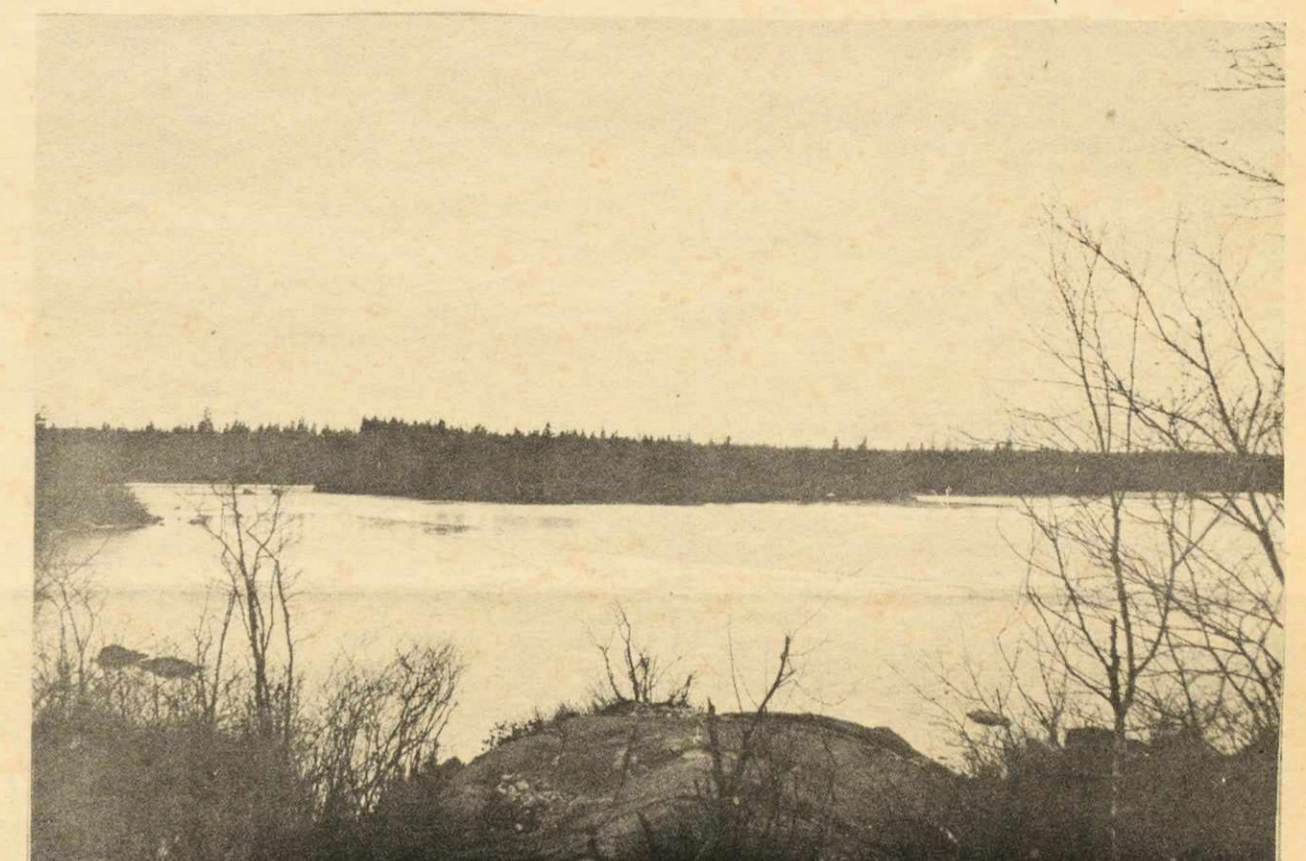




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Watershed lands for public park or private profit

by Michael Donovan

"Two years ago I had an opportunity to take a boat around the lakes and I couldn't believe my eyes. It was unspoiled, pristine, amazingly beautiful. I saw deer and I've heard the kids around there trap beaver."

The author of this statement is not, as you might think, referring to a wilderness paradise in Northern Canada. It may surprise you, in fact, to discover that the area described is not more than three miles from downtown Halifax.

The Halifax Watershed Lands, comprising 16,000 acres of untouched wood and lakeland, part of which is within the city limits, may be open for development as early as the end of 1977 according to Bill Gaetz, Chief Engineer for the Public Service Commission.

In 1974 the Public Service Commission, responsible for the management of Halifax's water supply, began the construction of a new \$45 million water supply system at Pockwock Lake, 22 miles to the north of Metro. For more than 130 years Halifax has obtained its water supply from the seven lakes making up the watershed lands in the western part of the city adjacent to Spryfield. This system is capable of producing 15.5 million gallons of water a day. The new Pockwock system, replacing the watershed system with a 31.5 million gallon daily capacity, is expected to be operational in early 1977.

Once Pockwock Lake water begins to flow, the Watershed lands will not be released for development and sale until "we have a proven source of supply of water" says Bill Gaetz. Nevertheless, a quiet debate has already begun to determine what will happen to the 16,000 acres and seven lakes.

On the one hand, many people argue that an Industrial Park is needed in Halifax to attract business tax revenue now presently going to Dartmouth. Other people believe that housing in Halifax is a priority and that, therefore, the Watershed lands ought to be converted into a model planned community designed to accommodate Metro's growing population.

On the other hand, Halifax alderman and former mayoralty candidate, Dennis Connolly, has suggested that "it would be a tremendous thing to have a major National Park type of set-up within the confines of the city." He points to the economic benefits to the city in terms of tourist dollars and the less measurable benefits of easily accessible recreational space.

Kline, General Manager of the Public Service Commission, says that maximization of profits will be a primary consideration for the Commission. He says, "We hope for the greatest amount of money possible out of these lands in order to keep water rates down."

Alderman Connolly says that "the value of the land depends very much on zoning. Industrial zoning would be worth much more than R-1 (single family residential)".

The question of what to do with the watershed involves many different levels and organs of government. The problem is further compounded by the complex nature of the Public Service Commission.

The Commission is a corporate entity created by Provincial Statute in 1944. Halifax City Council controls the commission insofar as they appoint the Commissioners and own all the shares. The Watershed is 82% owned by the Commission. (3,000 acres are owned privately.) But this 82% is encumbered by a deed of trust in favour of private debenture holders. The Commission is therefore a trustee and as such, is under a legal duty to deal with the lands in a manner which will secure the repayment of the debenture holders upon sale of the land.

It is important to note that, although the City, in effect, controls the sale of the Watershed lands, it does not control their development. 90% of the land is within the jurisdictional zoning capacity of the County of Halifax. Since the price is very much a function of the zoning, the County is in a very powerful position with respect to the ultimate development of the Watershed lands.

Also, to further complicate matters, the Regional Development Plan for the Halifax-Dartmouth Metropolitan Region prepared by the Department of Municipal Affairs (provincial) pursuant to the provisions of the Planning Act has, since 1975, been the ultimate guide for development within the Metropolitan area. The plan has ultimate jurisdiction over 1,900 acres of Watershed lands and designates most of the land in the Long-Chain lakes watershed area as a regional park - approximately 1,200 acres.

It is possible to appreciate the magnitude of this when it is realized that Point Pleasant Park covers an area of 185 acres.

As indicated by Kline, a major decisional factor for the Public Service Commission and therefore, the city, is money. Pockwock was built pursuant to the Special Areas agreement and later the Metropolitan Halifax-Dartmouth Subsidiary Agreement. According to these agreements, the Federal Government through the Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE) kicked in a little less than 70% of the cost of the project. The balance remains the responsibility of the Province or the city. There is currently a dispute as to which political body must pay. The city is relying on the DREE agreement, to which the province is a party, to relieve themselves of responsibility. The province

argues that its responsibility under the agreement extends only so far as the granting of a provincial loan. If the latter argument prevails, the Public Service Commission will have no choice but to sell at the highest possible price unless there is strong countervailing political pressure.

Several studies have been conducted to determine the recreational, industrial and residential feasibility of the watershed lands. A highly technical study of 1970 by Peter Jacobs, in fulfillment of a Canada Council Research Grant, recommended an even apportionment of the land for the above three purposes. A more recent study conducted by Sunderland, Preston, Simard and Associates advocates conversion of practically the entire Watershed land for recreational purposes. This technical survey found the area largely unsuited for residential development and felt there was strong evidence that over-zealous industrial development would destroy the recreation potential of large parts of the region.

Jacobs also established that significant areas of good farming potential exist south of Long Lake. It is interesting to note that public municipal garden plot rental has been highly successful outside many Canadian cities.

Another Watershed Study, prepared for the Advisory Board, in 1976, of Coalition for Development, a citizens' action group funded by the

Catholic and Anglican Churches, adopts an economic perspective. This study discovered that development costs per acre in the Watershed area were in the vicinity of \$18,000 as compared with \$14,000 in Sackville. (Development costs include sewer installation, lighting, road building, etc.)

The author of the Coalition study also found that extensive residential development of the watershed area might necessitate the construction of a 100 million-plus Northwest Arm bridge to alleviate transportation problems. Moreover, they analyzed growth projections for the City of Halifax and found them to be grossly exaggerated. At the moment the population of the City of Halifax is 225,000 people. Current predictions (MAPC) cite a population of 435,000 by 1991. This amounts to an 8 per cent rate of growth per year. Between 1961 and 1971 the growth rate in Halifax-Dartmouth area was 1.4 per cent per year. An optimistic growth rate of 2.5 per cent places the population by 1991 at 284,997.

Faced with these facts, the authors of the Coalition study believed that already existing growth areas such as the Sackville-Bedford region may well be able to handle any increased housing demand and, from an economic point of view, may be preferable.

All studies and efforts to date with respect to the Watershed lands have involved monetary or

technical considerations. Some community activists believe that any decision determining the development of the Watershed lands must involve directly the people of Halifax, taking into account their aspirations and plans for the future direction of the city.

Michael Brandfield, an active community worker and Economics professor at Dalhousie fears that "some of the super-growth people in the Civil Service plus super-growth politicians will try to see it sold off to the developers unless the public becomes aware of the implications and puts pressure on the politicians so that it can't happen." He believes that a large green space on the fringe of the city is a "priceless" asset.

Jim Lotz, a local consultant in the field of community development and citizen participation, and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of Plan Canada, (the journal of the Canadian Institute of Planners) noted that "the watershed lands are not a problem- they are an opportunity. The question that has to be answered is - how can these lands be used for the maximum benefit of the largest number of people in Halifax and the surrounding region?"

In my opinion, Halifax is in a universally unique position. There is probably no other city in the world with the chance to have a 10,000 acre park and recreational/educational reserve so readily accessible to its citizens.