

Sacred Indigenous site near Parliament at risk of private commercial development

Plans for site of Chaudière Falls, Islands seen as “offence to the spirit of the land”

by Greg Macdougall, *EquitableEducation.ca*
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Ottawa City Council has approved a rezoning application for private and commercial development on two islands at the Chaudière Falls, about a kilometre upstream from the Parliament buildings on the Ottawa River. The decision, made at a council meeting on Oct. 8, came despite numerous objections from citizens as well as a formal request for further dialogue from Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Chief Gilbert W. Whiteduck.

The land in question is unceded Algonquin territory, and the area at the falls is considered a central sacred site of the Algonquin and all Anishnaabe peoples. Samuel de Champlain’s writings documented a tobacco ceremony conducted at this specific site during the first European visits to the area in the early 1600s.

William Commanda’s vision in danger

A broadly supported vision for the site, which includes the falls and the full group of interconnected islands that are directly downstream from them, was championed over the past decades by the late Algonquin spiritual leader and elder Grandfather William Commanda, who was awarded both the key to the City of Ottawa and Officer of the Order of Canada. Commanda passed away in 2011 with the vision still to be fulfilled.

The vision for the site that Commanda named Asinabka, an Anishinaabe word meaning “place of glare rock,” includes the creation of Indigenous and Peace Centres on the downstream Victoria Island and the undamming of the falls, along with full public parkland on the two adjacent islands in question.

The two-fold vision is based on “healing, strengthening and uniting all Aboriginal



peoples” and “sharing Indigenous values and culture with all others.”

Undamming the falls would restore the site for traditional spiritual uses, and the establishment of the centres would bring back the historic use of the islands as a special gathering place of peoples from vast distances.

With the backing of the National Capital Commission, renowned Blackfoot-Métis architect Douglas Cardinal, most known for designing the Museum of Civilization (now renamed) in Gatineau and the Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., made formal plans for the site.

In contrast to this vision, the plans approved by the Ottawa City Council come from the Windmill Development Group and involve building a “world-class sustainable community” of condominiums and retail and office space on Chaudière and Albert Islands as well as on the Gatineau side of the river. This development is seen by some people as a prime addition to the National Capital Region and a great improvement on the current derelict status of the site.

Windmill entered into an agreement last year to obtain the lands from Domtar, a pulp and paper company that had closed

its mill there in 2007. Domtar got the land and the paper mill when it acquired the E. B. Eddy Company in 1998. As part of a wider lumber industry centred on the river, E. B. Eddy started producing matches on the islands in the 1850s, adding sawmills soon after, and paper mills a few decades later.

This industrial presence has meant no public access to the falls, and that is one reason the City looked favourably upon Windmill’s plans, as they include public access through a bit of public park space alongside the mostly private development. Additionally there is considerable toxicity of the land due to the long-term industrial use, and Windmill has expressed a willingness to take on the clean-up at an estimated cost of \$100 million.

Opposition to condo development plans

At the City Planning Committee meeting on Oct. 2, 38 people spoke against the rezoning. Only three, aside from Windmill and the City’s planning staff, spoke in favour. Additionally, 64 people sent

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written submissions of opposition. There was widespread support for honouring the sacredness of the site and its Aboriginal caretaking, and specifically for Commanda's vision. One speaker even referred to Commanda as "our Nelson Mandela." Despite this, the committee decided unanimously to recommend that City Council should approve the rezoning.

The next day, Kitigan Zibi Chief Whiteduck sent a formal request for dialogue to the council, asserting title to the land and asking for immediate dialogue with the council over the rezoning. Kitigan Zibi also sent a letter to the federal and provincial governments to "put them on notice."

Nevertheless, on Oct. 8, Ottawa Council passed the rezoning with only one dissenting vote.

Whiteduck expressed "profound disappointment" after the decision. "I'm still trying to consider what follow-up I'll do with the City. There will be one."

Windmill had conducted some prior engagement with various stakeholders, including Kitigan Zibi. Without responding directly regarding the Kitigan Zibi chief's request, Ottawa Mayor Jim Watson's office stated after the vote that the mayor "is supportive of Windmill's stated intention to engage further" with First Nations and supporters of Commanda's vision.

Whiteduck replied, "We would be asking that [the process] would be one on our terms, in our time frame. . . . We, the community, need to be very cautious about this, and we're not just going to jump because they're saying they're ready to do this or that." Whiteduck was clear that he's not making a judgement on the developer's agenda, but instead looking at the decision-making process.

Another Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg does have an opinion on Windmill's project. "If development occurs there, it's an offence to the spirit of the land," said Albert Dumont, an Ottawa resident who serves as a spiritual advisor or elder in the community, and has publicly written and spoken about the falls.

"It will signal that we came to the crossroads, and we took the wrong road. And it's a tragic thought, to have to think that's what we've done. People have lost their way. People no longer see the power of spirituality. They take their spiritual well-

being for granted when they allow a sacred site to be damaged by development — office buildings, condos. It really is painful to the heart to live at a time in history where such things are occurring."

Those who spoke or submitted opposition to the rezoning application have the option of submitting an appeal to the Ontario Municipal Board within 20 days of the City formally notifying them of the council's decision.

Although Domtar owns the majority of the two islands, some land is held by Public Works Canada, originally leased in perpetuity to E. B. Eddy. That land is currently being transferred to the National Capital Commission, whose spokesperson Mario Tremblay confirmed in an email to Ricochet that it is "responsible for Land Use and Design Approvals for any project that may be proposed on federally-owned lands in the National Capital Region." Tremblay, however, would not comment on the transfer of the lease for the new development, nor on the duty of consultation with Aboriginal interests.

Chief Whiteduck stated, "We still have a lot of work, a tremendous amount of work, to educate people in regards to our territory, to our title lands, the kinds of things that we're seeking, that inclusiveness."

"At times we will have to, and will, make clear statements where there is no compromise, while at other times we may, and in many instances, do some compromising, some balance. But there are some things for which we cannot compromise."

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Thanks to Louise Boucher, PhD, of the Société d'histoire de l'Outaouais, and City of Ottawa planning staff Hieu Nguyen for background information used in this article.

Also: visit Asinabka.com for more on William Commanda's vision for the site.

Audio interviews:

Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Chief Gilbert Whiteduck
(16 min, October 7 & 9 2014)

Windmill Development Group's Rodney Wilts
(9 min, October 8 2014)

- Both posted at EquitableEducation.ca

2015 Update:

A group, under the leadership of Douglas Cardinal, has been formed related to the OMB appeal and to protect and care for the Chaudière Falls and Islands heritage for future generations.

Contact them at akikpautik@gmail.com for more info and/or to receive updates.

Videos:

Asinabka - The Vision

3 min, 2010 - youtu.be/uFC6aSSmRs0



Architect Douglas Cardinal on the Chaudière Falls & Islands, and the Windmill development

10 min, 2014 - youtu.be/UeFqbRBU5mk



Free the Chaudière Falls - Lindsay Lambert

24 min, 2014 - youtu.be/PbYfVRzkB24



Spirituality, the Chaudière Falls, and Responsibility: Albert 'South Wind' Dumont

19 min, 2014 - youtu.be/Va3Vj317-_8

