

That's where the big community push for change comes in. In 1998, dozens of Cumberland residents came together to form the increasingly influential Friends of Petrie Island. Many of the volunteers were connected through their involvement in developing nature trails in Cumberland, while others had worked for years with local community associations and recreation clubs. "Nineteen ninety-eight was a good time to form," explains chair Al Tweddle. "It was the year the sand company's long-term lease was up, and many of us had been eyeing putting nature trails on the island. There was a real opportunity for change."

The Friends, who now number about fifty paid-up members, had three main goals in mind: to make people aware of the jewel in their midst, to open the island up and make it more accessible for families, and to make sure any new bridge across the Ottawa River from Gatineau did not pass through Petrie Island. They set to work, mapping and clearing out hiking trails, setting up a more formal picnic area, and organizing interpretive programs that include a turtle day each June and wildflower walks. By the fall of 1999, the Friends had compiled a report showing that more than 20,000 people had visited Petrie Island that season, using the picnic grounds, walking the trails, and learning about nature.

But the issue of the sand-dredging operation remained. Because the island is mostly classed as wetlands, only about twenty acres—the eastern part of the island where the sandpit sits—is suitable for development. As long as Roger Grandmaitre Ltd. remained in place, long-term plans for a true public beach would not be realized. Yet when the lease came up for renewal in 1998, it was extended until March 2000 and then extended again until 2001. It was looking like status quo until the City of Cumberland became part of the new City of Ottawa—and the dynamics of the issue suddenly changed.

"The big push for something to be done has really taken place with the new city," says Tweddle. "We have new interest in the project and new councillors."

That interest stems in large part from the election promises of the megacity's east-end councillors. Cumberland councillor Phil McNeely admits the island is not even in his ward—it's actually in fellow councillor Herb Kreling's. But that hasn't stopped him from seizing on the popularity of Petrie Island and pushing hard for city funds to develop an east-end beach to rival Britannia and Westboro in the west. "I brought it up at every house I

visited [during the election campaign]," he says. "And I got nothing but positive responses. People in the east end want this project."

McNeely is far from the first politician to see the island's potential nor is he the first to float development ideas around. But he and Kreling just might be the first east-end councillors with the right combination of resources, commitment, and timing to put words into action.

McNeely leans forward and gestures at the Petrie Island Master Plan Review on his desk. "The sand-turning ceremony is set for August 11 of this year. We've got the beach opening down for July 1, 2003." After decades of stalling, Petrie Island is going to have a beach by this time next year? "Yes." He makes the pronouncement with the utmost confidence. Actually, McNeely pronounces on everything with the utmost confidence. He knows a popular idea when he sees one, and he thinks he knows how to make it happen.

But there are a few big hurdles to jump first, the biggest being—as always—money.

The Master Plan Review, prepared for the city last October by coastal engineers W.F. Baird & Associates, provides data on everything from where the beach should be located (they suggest four beach areas, with each "cell" stabilized

through natural rock headlands) to water levels to water quality. The report divides development plans into three distinct phases, each more grandiose (and expensive) than the one before it.

It is the initial half of Phase I (Phase I, parts A and B, are shown on the map below) that McNeely is so certain can happen by 2003. Under the plan, Roger Grandmaitre Ltd. would dredge all the sand needed to build up the beaches. Its operations are slowly being phased out, so most of the equipment would be removed from the site next spring. Contractors would build the beach headlands, put in the beaches, and expand parking facilities. Total cost: in the neighbourhood of \$1.3 million. The second part of Phase I sees improved roadways, a beach shelter, and "real" washrooms. Total cost: another \$1.3 million.

From there, the report goes on to outline what might be done in the longer term if the money were to come through and if public demand were there. Phase II sees full running water and sewer systems, graded gravel trails, and more landscaping. Phase III, the real pie-in-the-sky segment of the report, envisages a \$16 million marina complete with sailing centre, amphitheatre, and marina building and snack bar.

So where will the money come from? The city has dedicated a paltry \$300,000 to Phase I, but McNeely sees a further \$1

Phase I: Once the sand-dredging operation is removed from the eastern edge of the island, planners would like to create four linked beaches, expand the parking lot, and build a beach shelter and washrooms

