

Tour hints at Mohawk Lake District potential

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A “sold out” free tour provided a glimpse into the rich history of the newly dubbed Mohawk Lake District on Sunday. More than 60 people crowded onto a pair of Brantford Transit buses for the escorted tour of Watts generating station and locks along the Grand River, Mohawk Lake and Canal, the Greenwich-Mohawk brownfield, Canadian Military Heritage Museum and other stops. Demand was so high that another 30 people were left on a waiting list.

“Five years from now there should be a commercial operator doing this tour,” said Dara Bowser, a member of city’s brownfields community advisory committee who volunteered on one of the buses.

“It just shows the interest in the community,” Coun. Richard Carpenter said.

He and Coun. David Neumann volunteered their time and shared their knowledge of the city with participants.

The tour was organized by Tara Tran, the city’s project manager of the brownfields remediation at Greenwich-Mohawk.

There were local experts like Barry Hill at each stop. He shared the history of Mohawk Chapel, the oldest building in Ontario, which celebrated its 230th anniversary earlier this year.

Bruce Hill wrote his master’s thesis on the Grand River Navigation Company in 1964.

The company formed in 1832 built a series of locks and dams at a cost of 50,000 pounds to make the Grand River navigable.

The three-mile Mohawk Canal was built during “canal fever” in Ontario, which also saw waterways like the Welland and Rideau canals constructed. The local canal cut nine miles off the 12-mile trip to Brantford by creating the shortcut.

Nearby to the remnants of the locks at the foot of Locks Road are the ruins of the Watts generating station, built by industrialist Alfred Watts, once the second richest man in Brantford. “Brantford people had electricity in their homes much earlier than everyone else because of this plant,” Bruce Hill said.

“Watts generating station was the first in Ontario, maybe the first in Canada,” said Mary Welsh, another of the tour guides.



Rob Adlam of the Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre outlines a goal to restore the former Timekeeper's Building of the Cockshutt Plow Co. and create an interpretive centre during the inaugural Mohawk Lake District tour on Sunday.

Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre members Rob Adlam and Ray Wright outlined a goal to restore the former Timekeeper's Building of the Cockshutt Plow Co. and create an interpretive centre.

"We are anxious, anxious, anxious to get on with getting at this particular piece of property but we also realize it that it is all wrapped up in the remediation process," Wright said.

The multimillion-dollar remediation of the former Greenwich-Mohawk industrial site along with the cleanup of Mohawk Lake represent tremendous opportunity for Brantford. The city will have 50 acres of city-owned land alongside a lake with a myriad of recreational opportunities to develop. It's all within a short distance of the historical sites on the tour.

"The start Brantford was Eagle Place, Echo Place and East Ward, so it really is the rebirth of the beginning of Brantford," Carpenter said.

Participants enjoyed the tour, which lasted about three hours.

Theresa Haq said it reminded her of a Doors Open event held in Brantford.

"It's good because we take things or granted," she said as she walked a footpath along the canal.

The canal could be deepened and used for canoeing, she suggested. "It could be nice."

Terry Skoryk came to hear the science of the brownfield remediation, but came away impressed by the history as well.

Eleanor and Hilton Lyons were interested in the Watts locks. Hilton was slowed by a broken ankle but still managed the tour in a wheelchair pushed by his wife. They vowed to go back to explore on foot once he is healed.

Other stops included Kanata Village and the Woodland Cultural Centre, site of the former Mohawk Institute Indian Residential School.