

## Historical Synopsis – from Epping Commons Development to Herman McConnell Memorial Forest, Beaver Valley

Compiled by Rob Leverty, President, Niagara Escarpment Foundation  
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1969-1976: Cambray Investments and Maxstone Holdings purchase properties, assembling 350 acres on the middle and upper western slopes of the Escarpment in the Beaver Valley between Epping and Talisman.

1979: Application to the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) for a permit to allow for the construction of **Epping Commons** including 46 two-storey detached condominiums; a 50-room commercial hotel; man-made ponds, a commercial recreational facility; a swimming pool and 6 tennis courts on lands designated natural and protection in the proposed Escarpment Plan. There are also approximately 12 streams within the proposed development area. Local municipality, Euphrasia Township Council strongly endorses Epping Commons Development.

1979: NEC rejects application “in that a development of this density with its subsequent visual and environmental impact cannot be deemed to be compatible with the natural environment of the Niagara Escarpment and contrary to the purpose and objectives of the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act (1973).”

1979-1980: Appeal by Epping Commons Developers to Niagara Escarpment Hearing Officer John Duncanson who supports NEC decision to reject their initial application. He concludes: “It seems, however, that the matter for decision is not so much how development could best take place, but whether any development should take place at all.”

1981: Landowners in Beaver Valley supporting the proposed Niagara Escarpment Plan incorporate the Beaver Valley Heritage Society and join forces with the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE), which includes the Canadian Environmental Law Association, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and other provincial environmental organizations, to oppose Epping Commons.

1981-1982: As part of the Provincial Hearings on the entire proposed Niagara Escarpment Plan, there is a special hearing on Epping Commons. CONE conducts a hydrological study of Epping Commons and its implications for the entire Beaver Valley. CONE’s expert witness testifies that “Development of Epping Commons is likely to cause massive, irreparable damage to valley hydrology and river water quality and supply.”

The Nature Conservancy of Canada testified that Epping Commons would nullify the concerted efforts of provincial and private agencies to maintain the Valley’s unique visual and natural characteristics through years of conservation land assembly and protection.

Individual landowners in the Beaver Valley testify against Epping Commons.

Euphrasia Township, Beaver Valley Planning Board and Grey County all testify in support of Epping Commons Development and new real estate development proposals for Talisman

North and Epping Terraces strip development.

1983: The Provincial Hearing Officers release their recommendations on the proposed plan for the Niagara Escarpment, recommending approval of the entire Epping Commons Development including new Talisman North proposal and extensive strip development called Epping Terraces.

June 1983: NEC staff recommend that the NEC reject the Hearing Officers' recommendation. Then Day of Shame as NEC suddenly reverses four years of opposition to Epping Commons and supports all recommendations of Hearing Officers' Report for large scale real estate development in southern part of Beaver Valley. Huge uproar at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and CONE and Beaver Valley Heritage Society declare war on NEC – provincial and national natural assets sacrificed for municipal interests.

August 1983: CONE launches judicial review of Hearing Officers Report as they exclude entirely CONE's hydrological report and related testimony from their Report which was submitted to the Ontario Government for review and a final decision.

1983-1984: CONE and Beaver Valley Heritage Society launch campaign to convince all three provincial political parties to reject Epping Commons and new strip development proposals, broadening public outreach to include new partners such as the Ontario Federation of Anglers & Hunters.

1984: After reviewing the Provincial Hearing Officers' Recommendations on the entire proposed Niagara Escarpment Plan, Conservative Minister Norman Sterling, responsible for the NEC, recommends to the Ontario Cabinet that it reject all three applications for new development in the Beaver Valley – Epping Commons, Talisman North and Epping Terraces – and that these lands on the western slopes of the Beaver Valley remain designated either Escarpment Natural or Protection Areas in the NEP.

N.B. Before his public announcement, Minister Sterling made a presentation to Cabinet. Although some Cabinet Ministers strenuously supported Epping Commons and more real estate development in the Beaver Valley, the majority of Cabinet endorsed his recommendations. But they were only recommendations which still had to be approved by Cabinet. When Premier Bill Davis announced his retirement in the Autumn of 1984, the real power struggle for the future of the Beaver Valley began.

June 1985: Just before Conservative Government is defeated in a non-confidence vote, Cabinet approves final Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP) including rejection of Epping Commons Development, Talisman North and Epping Terraces. When all three political parties in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario supported Cabinet's passage of the NEP, there was embedded in that support an inherent decision to protect the Beaver Valley's 40 km natural corridor south of Epping as a significant **provincial and national treasure** and to direct future development away from the continuous natural corridors and provincially significant watersheds of the southern Beaver Valley.

1986: Ownership of Epping Commons site is transferred to the Ontario Heritage Trust in return for a tax receipt for the full land value.

1994: NDP Government, as part of new Niagara Escarpment Plan after first five-year review of the plan, renames the Epping Commons site the **Herman McConnell Memorial Forest** to honour one of the valley's leaders of the fight to protect the site from large scale real estate development. The forest is added to the Beaver Valley network of the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System under the classification Natural Environment. As stated in the NEP: "The lands include the wooded tableland above the Escarpment, the rock face/talus slope and fields below. Managed by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, the property's recreational uses include hiking and scenery appreciation. The Bruce Trail crosses the lands."

**Compiled by Rob Leverty, February 8, 2022**

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Founding member, Beaver Valley Heritage Society, 1981