

The People's Waterfront of Burlington

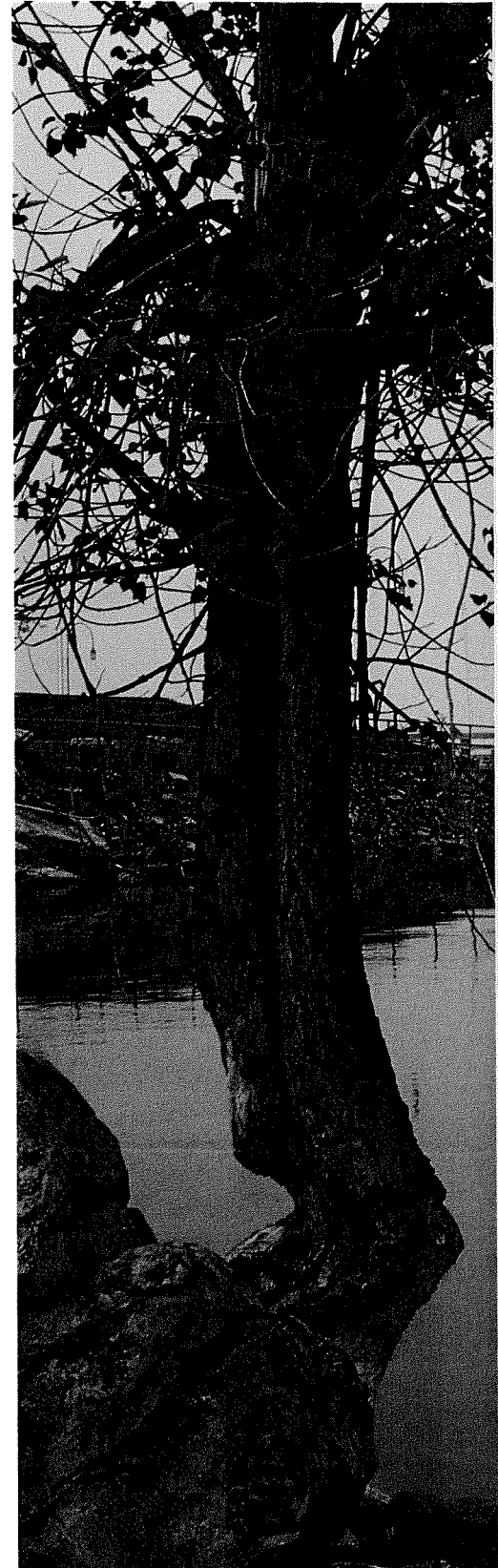
There's an old Vermont saying, "If you don't like the weather here, just wait five minutes." The story of the Burlington, Vermont's downtown waterfront might be described with a different twist: "If you don't like this run-down waterfront, just wait 20 years."

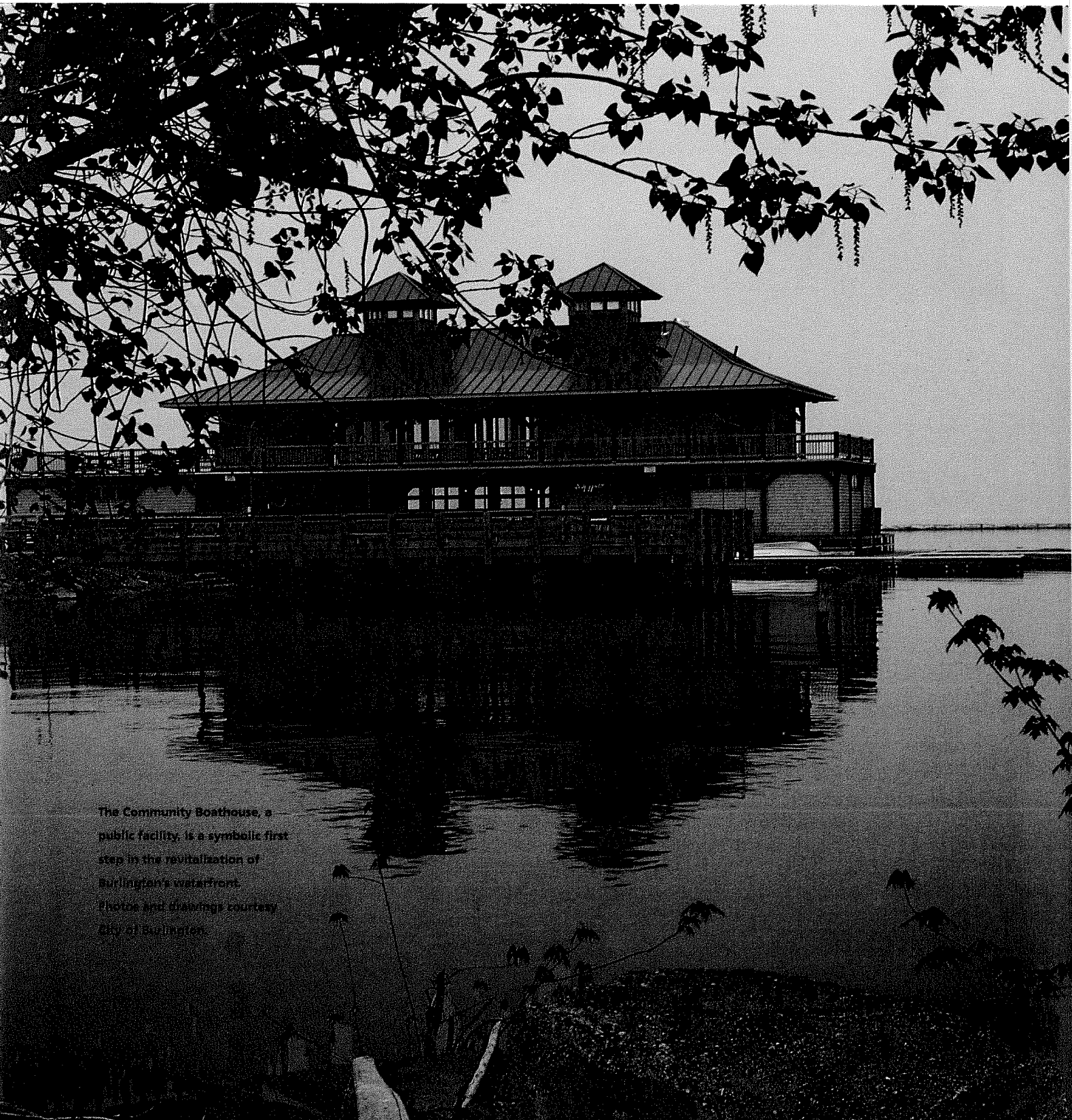
Burlington is Vermont's largest city, a regional center in northwestern Vermont for education, finance, health care and law. The city rises up a hill toward the east away from Lake Champlain, one of the largest fresh water lakes in the United States.

The waterfront dominated the city's economic base for almost a century. Burlington was once the third largest lumber port in North America, and the city's hill section boasts some magnificent homes built in the late 1800s with high-quality woods.

But the waterfront's importance began to fade in the 1950s and 1960s. With the growth of high-tech manufacturing firms like IBM (which started its Burlington operation in 1957) and the diminishing importance of shipping and railroading, Burlington, not uncharacteristically for a U.S. city in mid-century, turned its back on its waterfront. What was once a bustling economic center gradually evolved into a kind of off-limits zone of railyards, oil tanks and junk yards. Jobs were few, public access was severely restricted and visitors tended to view the magnificent sunsets from the hill rather than from the water's edge.

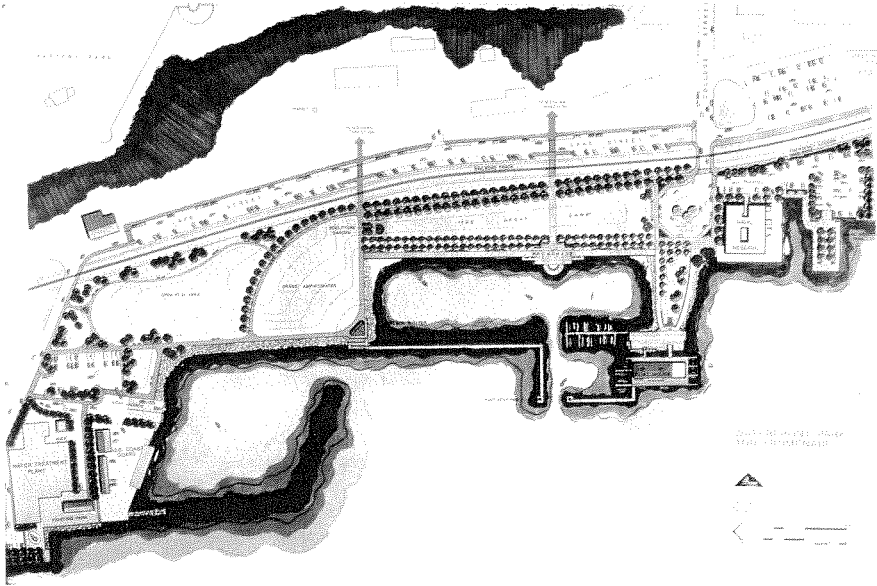
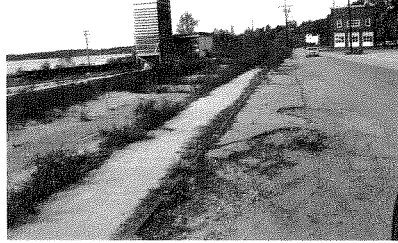
In 1973, hoping to make the waterfront more attractive, city leaders passed zoning ordinances that gave property owners until 1993 to remove oil tanks and other structures that were deemed unsightly. At the same time, the city was pursuing waterfront urban renewal projects that resulted in the demolition of some 200 homes and 40 small busi-





The Community Boathouse, a public facility, is a symbolic first step in the revitalization of Burlington's waterfront. Photos and drawings courtesy City of Burlington.

The waterfront as it appears now, and a concept plan approved by voters in March.



nesses. The goal of these actions was to provide better prospects for private sector development, such as luxury condominiums, offices and general commercial and retail space, along the city's waterfront.

But the redevelopment plans that were proposed in the 1970s and 1980s all failed. Triad Inc. of Montreal proposed a 10-acre, \$22 million residential and commercial project in 1978 but could not obtain financing. Burlington developer Antonio Pomerleau took over Triad's proposal in 1979, but could not win federal assistance. Heavy public opposition contributed to the demise of another Pomerleau proposal for a \$35 million hotel, marina, condominium and retail project in 1980. (The debate at the time was whether a miniscule quarter-acre of parkland, which would have been donated by the developer, would close at sunset or 10 p.m.)

In 1981, the political landscape of Burlington and Vermont changed with the election of Bernard Sanders, an avowed democratic socialist, as mayor by 10 votes. Sanders had campaigned in part on the theme "The Waterfront

Is Not For Sale," and it struck a resounding chord with voters.

As the director of Burlington's Community and Economic Development office under Mayor Sanders, I worked with him to promote a vision of a waterfront that would be accessible and affordable to all. Our goal was to provide generous uninhibited public access to the shoreline and public activities that would not require people to have a lot of money to enjoy.

The Sanders Administration was closely involved in the creation of the next master plan for waterfront revitalization. We worked with a local couple, Paul and Lisa Flinn, who had acquired control of key parcels. In 1984 their firm, the Alden Waterfront Corp., came forward with a \$100-million, mixed-use concept that would have taken 10 years to build.

The Alden proposal would have included almost six acres for parks as well as promenades, a boathouse, an art center, public marina, a maritime museum and affordable housing. It also would have included a five-story, 100-room inn on the shore, retail and office space, and 300 units of market-rate housing. There was a strong public presence in the discussion of the proposal; more than 1,000 people came out for different Neighborhood Planning Assembly reviews.

The city applied for, but did not receive, a \$23 million Urban Development Action Grant to support the project. Then we sought the voters' approval to issue \$6 million in general obligation bonds, which would have been used to help pay for the project's infrastructure and would have been paid back from tax-increment revenues. In exchange for this financial support, the city would have received significant concessions from the devel-

Axioms for a Public Waterfront

opers, including a share of future positive cash flow. But the bond proposal did not work, either. Although it won approval from 55 percent of the voters in a December, 1985, election, Burlington's charter requires a two-thirds vote of support for a general obligation bond.

City officials stepped back to evaluate why the people of Burlington rejected the bond issue. One factor was an unresolved legal issue, which the city had been pursuing at the same time, involving the ownership of much of the land along the shore. In the late 1800s the Vermont Legislature deeded 30 acres of filled lands to the Central Vermont Railroad Co. with the provision that the property be used only for railroad purposes. The city was pressing to see whether that land, which the city did not believe was being used for railroad purposes any longer, could be returned to public.

Another factor was that some people saw the city's financial support as a subsidy for luxury development. Others thought there was not enough parkland and open space (even though the 25-acre project would have included six acres of parks); some environmentalists did not want to see any development along the waterfront.

Whatever the specific reasons, the bottom line was clear: The people of Burlington wanted a better waterfront.

A New Vision Develops

After the bond issue was defeated, the developers began selling off parcels to recover some of their losses and the railroad began drafting its own development plans for its substantial land holdings on the waterfront.

We in city government decided to move quickly in a number of areas. We asked the Vermont courts to settle a

I have been intimately involved in waterfront development and revitalization for almost a decade. What have I learned? The lessons are many and we still have some challenges ahead of us. Here are a few ideas I would like to share.

A large project with only one developer is not always wise. Burlington's beautiful, historic downtown was built piece by piece by many people. That decentralized approach has been our tradition. We have had little experience, and little success, with large-scale projects pioneered by one firm or one vision. We are letting waterfront development evolve, letting it proceed in several small stages and promoting balanced, incremental development.

Access to the water's edge must be a condition for any development. Access must be defined well; it must be

forever. You will probably have to fight to get it, but do not compromise.

Political consensus is very important in developing the waterfront. Consensus is hard to create. You must pay attention to the range of constituencies in the community, particularly those interested in the environment and architectural heritage. You must pay attention to the impacts development will have on neighborhoods, especially lower-income ones.

Waterfronts cannot compete with downtown, nor can they ignore it. You must build strong links between the two. Waterfronts can serve as an anchor for downtown if it is nearby, and public investment on the waterfront can attract visitors to downtown.

Look to the past for design help. Our vanished waterfront district did not include many historic



Mayor Clavelle surveys the site.

buildings, but we have borrowed a lot from those that did exist. Our Community Boathouse design was selected after a design competition; the winning architect simply mimicked the design of the previous boathouse. People feel very comfortable with it, they feel that it is theirs.

Focus on neighborhoods near the waterfront. In Burlington, we cannot have success on the waterfront if revitalization causes nearby residents and businesses to be displaced.

Create the public spaces, the streets and parks, first. Design begins right at the street. The street pattern will segment the project and control its scale.

Create housing for a range of incomes. In Burlington, we must overcome the perception that there should not be housing on the waterfront because if there were, it would be exclusive.

Transportation and parking issues can be killers. You

should maximize the use of precious waterfront land for public uses and commercial areas that are pedestrian-friendly. We have promoted many ideas about how to do this. One is to create an “urban chair lift,” an enclosed gondola that would deliver up to 1,800 people per hour to the waterfront from parking areas near an interstate highway connection two miles east.

Own the land yourself. Traditional land use regulations can protect your natural resources, but if the land is really important to you, find a way to own it outright.

Avoid the temptation of doing it all now. We want to create an urban reserve of property on the waterfront. Future generations will decide how to use it; they will debate the issues, generate the controversy and have the fun and excitement we have had.

Above all, be patient.

— Peter Clavelle

long-standing legal dispute.

Specifically, had the railroad abandoned the land? If so, shouldn't the land revert to state ownership?

We rewrote the zoning for the waterfront. The City Council unanimously passed new standards for building heights, density, park space, open space, view protection and allowable uses. One of the regulations (passed in 1989) was an inclusionary zoning ordinance that requires at least 25 percent of any waterfront housing project to be affordable housing.

We adopted an official map of the area and began to plan for public improvements, commissioning an infrastructure study for the area.

Finally, we began investing in publicly owned facilities to meet public demand and to serve as a catalyst for future private sector development.

Bike Trails, Parks, a Boathouse and More

In 1988, we completed a nine-mile-long bike path along the waterfront, much of it on inactive railroad rights-of-way. This is an astounding recreational resource, more popular today than many of us dreamed it would be when we began the first sections of it a decade ago. The trail was opposed by property owners; one legal challenge made it to the U.S. Supreme Court. The city won its case in 1989 and in the process strengthened the constitutionality of the rails-to-trails statute.

We expanded and improved our parks along the entire waterfront, using annual capital improvements money and special funding. In March, 1987, voters approved a bond for park improvements and the construction of a \$1 million Community Boathouse, which was built on a barge that was towed from Texas to Burlington and



An earlier proposal for Burlington's waterfront.

The Boathouse provides activities that are affordable and accessible to a large number of Burlington residents.

which serves as an anchor and an inspiration for waterfront development. The Boathouse features a restaurant, meeting space, and marine-type concessions such as boat and SCUBA rentals, and was opened on July 4, 1988.

In November, 1988, voters approved \$2 million for purchasing some of the railroad land near the Boathouse and turning it into a waterfront park. Even though we had not yet secured title to the property, we immediately began planning and designing the park.

The debate on the park was over a fundamental issue: Should it be urban or should it be left as a natural area? The Green Party, actually a small group of people, felt the park should be left in a natural state. Sentiment for a “passive” urban park prevailed. Interest in the park (to be opened this summer) remains high; more than 150 people showed up at a meeting to discuss where the trees should be planted.

We finally were able to acquire the park site last summer after resolving the legal issue regarding land ownership and intense negotiations with the railroad over approximately 45 acres of its undeveloped waterfront land.

The Vermont Supreme Court ruled in 1989 that yes, the public could become owners of the lands deeded by the state legislature to the railroad if the land were no longer used for railroading purposes. It was a major victory, but the Court left unresolved a basic question: Had the railroad abandoned the land? We were still facing several years of litigation.

The city, the state and the railroad opted to settle our differences out of court. We negotiated a deal last summer that gave the city immediate access to the 11 acres we had designated for the waterfront park, at a price of



\$250,000. We also gained an option to purchase an additional 45 acres of railroad property by the end of 1991.

Based on this agreement, city voters approved a “concept plan” for the waterfront last November. The 10-year plan includes an indoor recreation center, a transportation center, human-scaled commercial and retail buildings on privately held land, an environmental research center, performing arts spaces and an “urban reserve” of land that would not be developed.

This March, the voters approved a measure to issue up to \$1 million in bonds to acquire the additional railroad property (which could cost up to \$1.96 million). They also approved spending \$1.9 million to acquire land and a building used by the U.S. Naval Reserve — a key site just south of the new Boathouse.

We are fortunate that developers in the late 1970s could not get financing for condominium towers. The people of Burlington are on the verge of creating one of the most unique waterfronts in the U.S.: a shoreline of complete public access through publicly owned parks, boathouses, marinas, bike paths and other public projects; a commercial/residential zone

built with an eye to human scale and historical relationships; and an unprecedented open, public process to keep people involved in the waterfront’s evolution.