

Canadian Brownfields Case Study

Cobourg Tannery District



Source: Fotenn Planning + Design

The Cobourg Tannery District's Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan illustrates a self-sustaining community, both environmentally and socially, just North of the town's downtown district.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The Cobourg Tannery District is part of a policy overhaul known as the Cobourg Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan. The policies set out within the plan outline a method for developers to remediate and revitalize a key area of the Town of Cobourg to establish an economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable community. The affected area is an historic brownfield site where tanning manufacturers operated for a century. Key policies look to provide developers the guiding principles needed to form a sustainable community on an underutilised brownfield site. The District's policy development function through the creation of this Master Plan, a supplementary Secondary Plan, and subsequent Zoning By-Law. The Plan was a finalist for the 2019 Brownie Awards under the Reach Out category.

History

Cobourg's Tannery District had a long heritage of industry, starting in 1870 as the site of the Crossen Car Factory, a manufacturer of railway freight cars for CP Railroads and the Grand Trunk¹. When Crossen closed in 1915, the first tannery moved in, opening nine years later in 1926². During this time, cowhides, fish skins, and sheep hides became a majority commodity

Cobourg exported to Toronto.³ The manufacturing plant itself moved hands on multiple occasions, moving from Boston-based owners to one's in Kitchener.⁴ However, by the 1980s, the introduction of synthetic substitutes caused the industry to collapse⁵. Canada Blue Tanning was the last manufacturer remaining⁶ and shut down its own facilities in 1988⁷.

The tannery buildings remained unused until

QUICK FACTS

Location

Cobourg, Ontario

Project type

Sustainable Community Development Plan

Site size

15 hectares

Land uses

Sustainable Residential and Commercial

Keywords/special features

Urban renewal, sustainable development, green infrastructure, environmental and socially sustainable policies, community redevelopment

Website

<https://www.cobourg.ca/en/business-and-development/Tannery-District.aspx>

<https://fotenn.com/project/tannery-district-sustainable-neighbourhood-master-plan/>

Project address

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Case studies were prepared as a course assignment by students enrolled in PL8312/PLE845: Brownfields & Sustainable Development, School of Urban and Regional Planning, Ryerson University (Winter 2021). Information for the case studies was obtained from online sources, available reports, and, in some cases, site visits and direct communication with stakeholders.

If you are aware of any errors or updates to the case studies, please contact chris.desousa@ryerson.ca

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2007⁸ when the Town of Cobourg acquired the former industrial lands and demolished any the derelict buildings still standing, citing irreparable structural damage as the reason.⁹

The Municipality began to work on a vision to remediate the site into a socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable community¹⁰. Fotenn, a private consulting firm, became involved in the Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan in 2017 after winning a Request for Proposal bid¹¹. The firm completed a draft Plan for the Town, and are awaiting approval from the Municipal Council¹². Once approval and revisions are complete, Fotenn will continue working with Cobourg to develop a Secondary Plan and Zoning By-Laws¹³, which will be designed to promote sustainable development¹⁴.

Site Characteristics

The site is located on historic brownfield lands, bordering the Canadian National and Via rail line to the North¹⁵ and within close proximity to the downtown core of Cobourg to the South¹⁶. The land use bordering the site is a mix of industrial, commercial, and low density residential¹⁷. In total, the site is spread over 15 hectares of mostly undeveloped land¹⁸, which is designated as industrial within the Municipal Official Plan¹⁹.

The exact boundaries of the proposed Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan also include some of currently used industrial land as well as private residential dwelling units²⁰. The site itself is contained by fencing and natural overgrowth²¹. The original buildings that were found on the site have been demolished, with only the base foundation remaining²². Tanning horses and a tanning drum are the only remnants of the tanning industry that remain on the site²³.

Planning and Redevelopment

The redevelopment of Cobourg's Tannery District began to take shape when the town introduced a Community Improvement Plan for the area in 2009²⁴. The Community Improvement Plan was designed to establish guiding principles and objectives for the redevelopment and intensification of the District²⁵.

Fotenn's Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan was commenced in three phases over the period of May 2017 to June 2018²⁶: data collection and background review, policy formulation, and the drafting of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan²⁷. During the



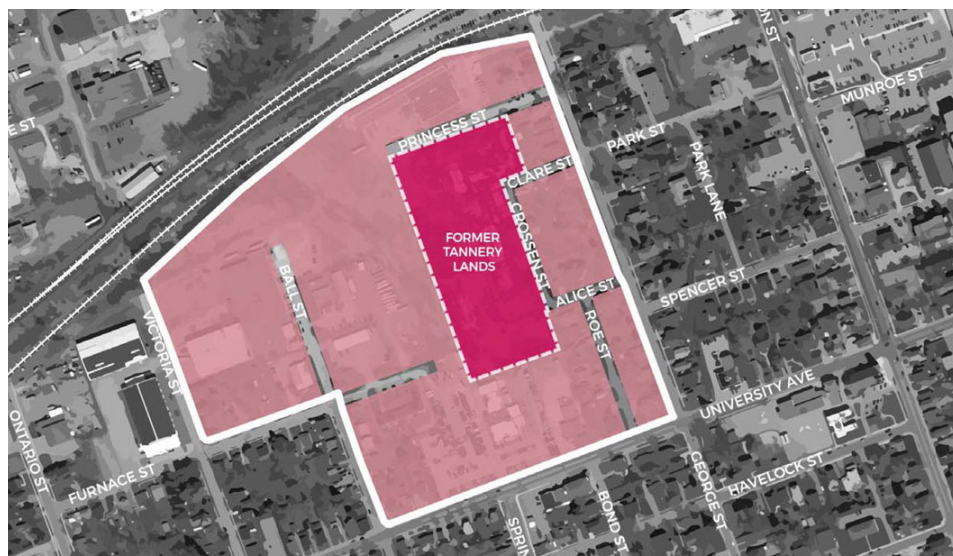
A derelict Tannery Factory existed on the site prior to its demolition in 2007.

first phase of the plan, Fotenn developed a background report to provide details on what precedence has been set by other sustainable communities such as South East False Creek in Vancouver and Zibi's work in Ottawa²⁸. Using the information gathered from this precedence review, Fotenn was able to gather what measures worked best, including how to create a truly sustainable community by considering all elements of the built environment²⁹. Using these precedence allowed the firm to establish the One Planet Framework³⁰, which focuses on the following sustainable principles to drive Urban Plans: health and happiness; equity and local

economy; culture and community; land and nature; sustainable water; local and sustainable food; travel and transport; materials and products; zero waste; and zero carbon energy³¹.

The Master Plan was written to have recommendations that celebrated the industrial heritage of the Tannery District³². Several functioning warehouses located within the Tannery District's boundaries were designated as heritage properties and would be prioritized for mixed use relevant to the Framework³³. In addition, the original location of the tannery buildings will be developed into an open space meeting point as a central piece to the District³⁴.

Boundaries of the proposed Tannery District in context of the Town of Cobourg.



Community Involvement

During the early periods of research on the Tannery District's Master Plan, charettes and public open houses were held to gather public opinion on the area's redevelopment³⁵. The Public Open House session was also used as a workshop to teach the community about sustainable measures and how to apply them³⁶. This workshop yielded more detailed responses about what features they would like to see included within the Tannery District³⁷. These features include: mixed-use development, low carbon living, open and green public space, community energy systems, and the implementation of green infrastructure³⁸. These ideas would be synthesized into sketches developed by Fotenn, which were presented at a later date for further feedback³⁹.

Sustainability Features

The 10 principles of the One Planet Living Framework were the driving force for establishing policies that would enhance the Tannery District's community⁴⁰. Currently, this Framework has been adopted in 21 different urban districts including downtown Ottawa⁴¹. For Cobourg's Tannery District, these policies were used to create direction for development and community planning⁴². Creating policies that highlight urban design promoting healthy, active living was used to fulfill communal health and happiness⁴³. Innovative opportunities for affordable housing in co-operative housing solutions provided the

community with equity and a local economy⁴⁴. Identifying and prioritizing strategic locations for public space and gatherings provided opportunities to enhance the culture and community⁴⁵. Providing extensive native tree coverage and a buffer along the rail corridor prioritizes the land and nature of the District⁴⁶.

Policies focusing on reducing impervious surfaces and exploring the use of water collection technologies (i.e. cisterns, bioswales, etc.) prioritizes the District's sustainable water source⁴⁷. The creation of community gardens will allow a priority towards local and sustainable food⁴⁸. Designing streets with pedestrians in mind allows a more sustainable travel and transport feature⁴⁹. As well, developers will be tasked with maximizing local building material and re-use existing on site materials such as old foundations⁵⁰.

To create a self-sustaining community, policies were established to create a share-and-swap that celebrated the industrial heritage of the area⁵¹. This would be achieved by creating mixed-use spaces where community members can use their residence as workshops to develop their products⁵².

Financing and Remediation

These sustainable features in the Tannery District are designed to be primarily driven by private development⁵³. Due to the prescriptive nature of the policies, the developers may be constrained⁵⁴. However, these prescriptive policies

also provide a boon for a dialogue between the Town and private developers due to the detail and intended transparency of the Master Plan, Secondary Plan, and Zoning By-Laws⁵⁵.

Considering contaminants are still present on the site⁵⁶, various incentive programs are available to help developers to take on the remediation process⁵⁷. The Tannery District Community Improvement Plan in particular, has a myriad of financial incentive programs that are designed for this purpose⁵⁸. These programs include the Environmental Study Grant, Brownfields Property Tax Cancellation Program, Redevelopment/Rehabilitation Grant Program, Building, and Facade Improvement Loan Program, and the Fee Grant Program⁵⁹. These funds and grants would be provided to pay for environmental studies to initiate the redevelopment process, cancel property taxes for property owners who undertake rehabilitation on contaminated lands, and pay a grant to offset increased property taxes⁶⁰. While the municipality's Official Plan makes recommendations for green and sustainable infrastructure including LEED certified, it does not provide direct financial incentives⁶¹.

The Community Improvement Plan also promotes public/private partnerships in the construction of infrastructure and a vehicle to access upper level government funding⁶².

Lessons Learned

Overall, the Cobourg Master Plan provides an ambitious vision for placing sustainable planning policies in the forefront for developers to partake in. The municipality's director of planning and development, Glenn McGlashan, noted that this Master Plan can create precedence for future sustainable planning.⁶³ He added that this plan would place Cobourg on the map in North America similar to Freiburg, a German city that used a former military base to jump start sustainable development.⁶⁴

However, a major obstacle and unknown remains for the Town in how it will attract developers. Due to the constricting nature of the zoning by-laws, developers must implement sustainable features in their developments as well as remediate the land. While financial tools are in place, there are concerns that these projects will be too expensive for most developers to consider.

Fotenn, the designer of the Plan, references the transparency of the policies as key to motivate developers to build despite the costs.⁶⁵



Source: Google Maps Satellite Imagery, 2019

The Tannery District's Sustainable Master Plan will feature self-sustaining 'share-and-swap' economy with mixed land use on major pedestrian avenues.

Endnotes

- [1] Redevelopment plan targets former Cobourg tannery (Northumberland News, 2009)
- [2] Ibid
- [3] Life After Crossen (Cobourg Museum, 2016)
- [4] Ibid
- [5] Ibid
- [5] Ibid
- [6] Ibid
- [7] Ibid
- [8] Ibid
- [9] Ibid
- [10] Planning & Development, Tannery District (Town of Cobourg, 2021)
- [11] Matt Reid, Fotenn Planning + Design (2021)
- [12] Ibid
- [13] Ibid
- [14] Ibid
- [15] The Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan Background Report (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [16] Ibid
- [17] Cobourg Zoning By-law 85-2003 (Town of Cobourg, 2010)
- [18] Google Maps Survey (2021)
- [19] Cobourg Zoning By-law 85-2003 (Town of Cobourg, 2010)
- [20] The Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan Background Report (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [21] Google Maps Survey (2021)
- [22] Ibid
- [23] Life After Crossen (Cobourg Museum, 2016)
- [24] Tannery District Community Improvement Plan (Town of Cobourg, 2009)
- [25] Ibid
- [26] Planning & Development, Tannery District (Town of Cobourg, 2021)
- [27] Ibid
- [28] The Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan Background Report (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [29] Ibid
- [30] Matt Reid, Fotenn Planning + Design (2021)
- [31] One Planet Living Framework (Bioregional, 2021)
- [32] The Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan Background Report (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [33] Ibid
- [34] Matt Reid, Fotenn Planning + Design (2021)
- [35] Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan for the Tannery District Design Concepts Workshop (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [36] Ibid
- [37] Ibid
- [38] Ibid
- [39] Ibid
- [40] The Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan Background Report (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [41] One Planet Living Framework (Bioregional, 2021)
- [42] The Tannery District Sustainable Neighbourhood Master Plan Background Report (Fotenn Consultants, 2018)
- [43] Ibid
- [44] Ibid
- [45] Ibid
- [46] Ibid
- [47] Ibid
- [48] Ibid
- [49] Ibid
- [50] Ibid
- [51] Matt Reid, Fotenn Planning + Design (2021)
- [52] Ibid
- [53] Ibid
- [54] Ibid
- [55] Ibid
- [56] Matt Reid, Fotenn Planning + Design (2021)
- [57] Downtown Cobourg Vitalization Community Improvement Plan (Town of Cobourg, 2016)
- [58] Tannery District Community Improvement Plan (Town of Cobourg, 2009)
- [59] Ibid
- [60] Ibid
- [61] Consolidated Official Plan (Town of Cobourg, 2010)
- [62] Tannery District Community Improvement Plan (Town of Cobourg, 2009)
- [63] Sustainable neighbourhood could put Cobourg's vacant Tannery lands on the map (Northumberland News, 2016)
- [64] Ibid
- [65] Matt Reid, Fotenn Planning + Design (2021)