

SCHNEIDEREIT: Will Halifax city council see wisdom of daylighting river?

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After hurricane Beth struck Nova Scotia on Aug. 16, 1971, Sullivan's Pond (shown here) in Dartmouth overflowed its banks, flooding nearby streets. The Sawmill River, which then ran from Sullivan's Pond to Halifax Harbour, also overflowed, causing widespread damage in downtown Dartmouth. That led to the decision to divert the river through an underground culvert the following year. (Norwood photo)

Over the holidays, I watched a fascinating documentary, Lost Rivers (<http://rivieresperdues.radio-canada.ca/en>), on a subject I knew little about — drainers and daylighting.

The former term refers to folks who like to climb down into drains and explore long-buried urban watercourses that flow, through kilometres of unlit culverts, underneath many modern cities.

The latter refers to the burgeoning movement to let the sun shine again on many of these almost forgotten streams and rivers.

It sounds romantic, and there's no question some of that spirit motivates its proponents. But daylighting has also proved to be a practical force for improving environmental systems dealing with pollution and excess runoff, and an economic catalyst for encouraging and accelerating urban renewal.

One of the cities the documentary featured was Yonkers, New York. Not that many years ago, a huge parking lot sat in the hub of downtown Yonkers, surrounded by underutilized buildings. Today, that same setting is an urban park bordering the unearthed Saw Mill River (<http://daylightyonkers.com/>), freed from the underground culverts where it had flowed for nearly a century.

The result?

Life has returned, in fish, frogs and birds and other wildlife that have reappeared in and near the waters, in crowds drawn to the park, but also in the ongoing redevelopment that's reshaping a now attractive urban core.

Cities worldwide have buried streams and rivers for centuries, funnelling them through drains and culverts, mainly on grounds of protecting public health and preventing flooding.

Today, however, a lot of that infrastructure is crumbling, or unable to deal with the increased runoff from storms. In some cases, storm overflows create new flooding problems or push untreated sewage into nearby bodies of water.

Enter daylighting as a possible solution, with side benefits.

Critics say daylighting is more expensive than simply replacing the old infrastructure. That's no doubt usually true in the short term, but in the longer term, such accounting seems suspect, as it ignores spinoffs such as possible economic development and environmental benefits, as well as not having to replace at least some of the infrastructure.

There's a Nova Scotia angle to this topic.

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In recent years, a number of community groups and non-profits have proposed daylighting the former Sawmill River (<http://thechronicleherald.ca>).

For those unfamiliar with this short watercourse, it used to flow from Sullivans Pond to Halifax Harbour, connecting the port with the Shubenacadie Canal system. After hurricane Beth caused flooding in downtown Dartmouth in 1971, the Sawmill was buried, its waters ever since running roughly half a kilometre through a steel pipe.

That culvert now needs to be replaced, probably this spring. That's an opportunity, [proponents say \(https://www.ecologyaction.ca/SaveSawMillRiver\)](https://www.ecologyaction.ca/SaveSawMillRiver), to daylight the river.

Halifax Water has been in talks with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans about what will be required in the way of fish passages — a requirement not in force when the original pipe was installed. Daylighting would obviously improve [the ability of fish to move upstream \(http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1253618-%E2%80%98daylighting%E2%80%99-sawmill-river-is-the-right-water-course\)](http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1253618-%E2%80%98daylighting%E2%80%99-sawmill-river-is-the-right-water-course).

I spoke to Halifax Water's communication and public relations co-ordinator, James Campbell, on Monday. He said they're well aware of community support for daylighting the Sawmill River and have no philosophical objections to the idea.

But, Campbell said, Halifax Water only owns the specific, narrow right of way through which the current pipe is routed. Changing the route to daylight the river would involve private property outside of Halifax Water's purview. Its mandate, he said, is to work out an acceptable plan with DFO for fish passage while replacing the culvert, then present it to the Utilities and Review Board for approval.

In other words, if daylighting the river is to happen, the city of Halifax needs to get involved.

The city's own policy on river daylighting (<http://www.halifax.ca/energy-environment/environment/PolicyonRiverDaylighting.php>), adopted in 200 states "where existing HRM stormwater collection infrastructure must undergo significant repair or replacement, daylighting of the watercourse involved will be considered as an option."

Daylighting the Sawmill through downtown Dartmouth would have long-term benefits. Will city council step up and get on board, as so many other progressive cities worldwide have?

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