

Canadian Institute of Planners - Vision in Planning Award 2011

Nomination: **The Grand Concourse** St. John's region, Newfoundland and Labrador

Nominator: Atlantic Planners Institute, Newfoundland and Labrador Branch
July 2011

The Grand Concourse is a walker's paradise -- an integrated, well planned walkway network spanning the metropolitan area of Newfoundland and Labrador's provincial capital, St. John's, and its neighbouring municipalities, Mount Pearl and Paradise. Over 130 kilometres in length, the Grand Concourse links a series of rivers, lakes and ponds, parks and green spaces, providing access to the beautiful natural features of the metro region. It is a result of imagination, planning, and hard work, as well as significant funding.

We nominate the Grand Concourse to receive CIP's Vision in Planning Award for 2011. It is an excellent example of planning in action – resulting in a system of walks that has become widely known and is well used and valued by citizens and visitors.

Background

In 1989, the Johnson Family Foundation (JFF), founded by Paul Johnson of Johnson Insurance, developed "The Lookout" on Signal Hill. This spawned the idea of linking existing paths into a connected system. Mr. Johnson coined the term "Grand Concourse" to describe it. At the outset he involved four (4) partners to vet the concept: the City of St. John's, Parks Canada, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and the Quidi Vidi/Rennie's River Development Foundation. The idea ignited a lot of interest from the public and from environmental and outdoor groups, and the Grand Concourse Authority was formed. It included the Johnson Family Foundation, its original four partners, the St. John's Port Authority, the three municipalities (St. John's, Mount Pearl, and Paradise), and other parties. The work was afoot.

In 1990, Fred Hann, landscape architect, was hired by JFF to oversee the first two of 10 planning studies to investigate the potential of various ponds and rivers serving as a trail corridor connecting the three municipalities. Each study project looked at walkway routes, land ownership, adjacent land uses and potential conflicts, and created extensive maps and construction details for bridges, walkway surfaces, signage, parking areas, crosswalks and other matters. In 1991, Heddy Peddle was hired as Executive Secretary (later Executive Director), and by 1992, Neil Dawe, landscape architect and planner, was hired as Executive Officer of the new Grand Concourse Authority (www.grandconcourse.ca). The initial task was to plan the system, using landscape architects, planners, engineers, and an array of technicians, construction



supervisors and skilled workers. In 1994, the Grand Concourse Authority Act was enacted by the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly, giving the Authority firm legislative footing.

The master plan for the Grand Concourse walkway system guided the development of a high-quality network extending from Signal Hill in the east, through the cities of St. John's and Mount Pearl, and to Octagon Pond in the Town of Paradise in the west. The walkways and sidewalkways in the plan would create a "Walker's Paradise", providing a variety of outdoor experiences. The administrative costs of the Grand Concourse Authority, originally paid by the JFF alone, were covered by the annual fees paid by the members of the GCA (originally, there were 15 member groups).

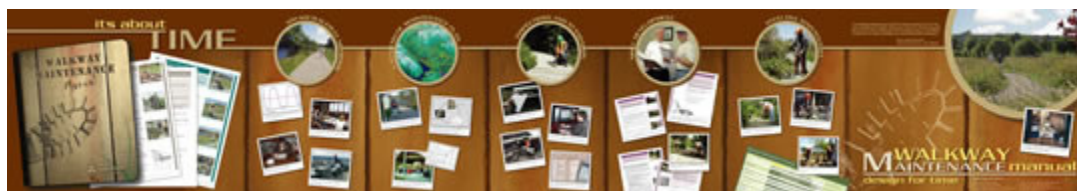
By 2005, the system was complete after years of hard work, and the GCA evolved into a role of maintenance and inspection, with some design and construction work still being done.

Best Planning Practices and Long-Term Benefit

The CIP awards program showcases best practices in the planning profession. The Grand Concourse is an excellent example of this. The St. John's region started with a scattering of trails in urban parks and along rivers, not connected to one another; quality long-term planning has produced a magnificent system of connected walkways that provide a variety of experiences, from the heights of Signal Hill overlooking St. John's and the Atlantic Ocean, to the sidewalks of busy streets, to quiet paths in the woods around Octagon Pond and Kent's Pond. Thousands of people use the Grand Concourse regularly, summer and winter, on their way to work and school and for regular outdoor activity, whether walking, jogging, walking the dog, sightseeing, feeding the ducks at Bowring Park or Kenny's Pond, or enjoying the Royal St. John's Regatta at Quidi Vidi Lake each August.

Planning is a long-term endeavour. Developing and implementing a plan like the Grand Course Master Plan takes years. The Grand Concourse Authority started with a vision, laid out a series of planning studies, and dug into the details of how to achieve the vision along each section of trail. The process involved extensive consultation with governments and other public agencies as well as with homeowners along the trail system. Each project involved public consultation meetings to set out the ideas for the trail, listen to objections and concerns, and respond to them. This effort toward ensuring that the community understands the proposed plans and supports them has paid dividends in the success of the trail system.

Planning decisions made today can live on for decades. A good indicator of a successful plan is its longevity. The Grand Concourse, originated as an imaginative idea in the 1980s, is approaching 20 years of reality as the walkway system expanded, achieving completion in 2005.



The Grand Concourse Authority also looked to the future by creating its award-winning *Walkway Maintenance Manual* several years ago. The *Manual* is a comprehensive guide to walkway and park maintenance, based upon techniques established and tested by landscape architects, construction supervisors and maintenance personnel. Printed on robust Tyvek paper in a ring binder, the 196-page *Manual*, while

written for the Grand Concourse originally, has found a wider audience across Canada among landscape architects and students, municipal managers, park planners, trail groups, and environment-based organizations.

The CIP Vision in Planning Award recognizes and highlights successful plans that have been thoroughly implemented and have demonstrably improved the quality of life for a Canadian community. The Grand Concourse fits the bill. Indeed, several years ago, a study commissioned by the Grand Concourse Authority identified the benefits of the Concourse to the community in terms of physical and mental health, well-being, environmental awareness, economic activity, and tourism. Even the enhanced realty value of private properties bordering the Concourse was considered in the mix.

The Grand Concourse has made a significant contribution to the St. John's region and its social, environmental, and economic fabric.

People Involved

A large number of people were and are involved in the Grand Concourse. Among them:

Paul J. Johnson, originator of the vision and founder of the Johnson Family Foundation

Addison Bown, current Executive Officer, Grand Concourse Authority

Sharon Penney, Manager of Administration, Grand Concourse Authority

Jamie Billard, Manager of Construction, Grand Concourse Authority

Chris LeMessurier, Landscape Designer of the Grand Concourse Authority

Heddy Peddle, Executive Director (retired), Johnson Family Foundation

Neil Dawe, landscape architect and original Executive Officer of the Grand Concourse Authority. Neil is now the President of Tract Consulting Inc., St. John's, and a former provisional member of CIP

Fred Hann, landscape architect, Frederick Hann Associates Ltd., hired to oversee the first planning studies

The following professionals worked with the Grand Concourse Authority at various times during the years of the implementation of the Grand Concourse:

Gerhard Weiland, MCIP, planner and landscape architect, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now with Tract Consulting Inc., St. John's, NL

Kim Blanchard, MCIP, formerly employed with Frederick Hann Associates Ltd., now with the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Municipal Affairs, St. John's, NL

Julia Schwarz, MCIP, planner and landscape architect, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now with the City of Mount Pearl, NL

Ed Versteeg, planner and landscape architect, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority and former provisional member of CIP, now working in Nova Scotia

Mark Hefferton, MCIP, planner, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now working in London, Ontario

Cynthia Hildebrand, planner and landscape architect, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now working in Victoria, BC

Roxanne Button, architect, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now working in Buffalo, NY

Scott Baker, landscape architect

Sandro Bassanese, landscape architect

Terry Barton, landscape architect

France Cormier, landscape architect

Bridget Couban, landscape architect

Tanya Greisbauer, landscape architect

Peter Heyblom, landscape architect

Jay Jackson, landscape architect

Karl Keough, planner and accountant, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now working in St. John's, NL

Hanita Koblents, landscape architect

Josee Labelle, landscape architect

Tanya Lewinberg, landscape architect

Sarah McCullough, landscape architect

Sean Malby, landscape architect

Kate Preston, landscape architect

Tom Prokai, landscape architect

Soonya Quon, landscape architect

Todd Saunders, architect, formerly with the Grand Concourse Authority, now working in Norway

Shiona Sommerville, landscape architect

Mike Tocher, landscape architect

Dave Wood, landscape architect

Tony De Jong, MCIP, retired planner, formerly with the City of St. John's Department of Planning, now living in Kanata, ON

Heather Hickman, Manager of Community Development, City of St. John's Department of Recreation

Awards Received by the Grand Concourse

Canadian Society of Landscape Architects, National Honour Award 2003

CSLA Regional Honour Award 2004 for the Bowring Park Duck Pond Rehabilitation Project (shown here)

CSLA Regional Citation Award 2005 for the *Walkway Maintenance Manual*

American Society of Landscape Architects, National Honor Award 2005



St. John's Clean and Beautiful, Community Organization Award 2003 for the beautification project at Harbourside Park (shown here)

Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2003 Manning Heritage Award for the Bishop Spencer School Memorial (including the Spencer Girl statue shown here) at Rawlins Cross, St. John's -- award shared with the City of St. John's and the Bishop Spencer School Class of 1959



Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 2001 Award for Excellence in Innovation

Newfoundland T'Railway Council, 2001 Trailblazer of the Year Award. The Grand Concourse uses some of the Newfoundland T'Railway – the abandoned railbed of the former Newfoundland Railway, which crosses the island and is now a provincial park – as part of the Trans-Canada Trail. The Newfoundland Railway was closed in 1988.

