

Allies

It's simply not true that everyone is either part of the solution or part of the problem.



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As the world stumbles down a rutted path to deeper ecological and economic debt, folks of many persuasions are likely to notice a problem or two. And they don't have to see the same problem, or

see it the same way, to be useful.

Take, for example, the accidental allies who reversed the tide of water management here in Waterloo, Ontario. Almost the entire city lies within the watershed of Laurel Creek, an unassuming tributary of the Grand River. Like most urban waterways, Laurel Creek has been abused. Over the years, parts of it have been dammed, diverted, channelled, constrained in culverts, buried in tunnels and used as a receptacle for various contaminants.

Back in the late 1980s, the municipality and the conservation authority decided to improve the creek, starting with a short stretch just past the downtown core, where the water escapes confinement and becomes mildly unruly. By "unruly" I mean semi-natural, with creek-side vegetation that grew by itself and populations of muskrats and minnows, plus the odd stolen bicycle or abandoned grocery cart. By "improve" they meant straighten and line with concrete.

The intent was to mitigate flood risk. The city was sprawling westward into the creek's headwaters, coating the upper watershed with impermeable surfaces. Engineers calculated that the increased flows during heavy snow melt or precipitation would exceed the capacity of the existing creek. Following the then-prevailing convention, the authorities proposed a smooth concrete bed to facilitate faster flow and prevent flooding.

The authorities' plan met an immediate and hostile public response from diverse

sources. Nearby residents, who might have been expected to worry about potential flooding, rose to defend the battered wildness of the unimproved creek, with its bushy margins and mostly agreeable wildlife. Some creek defenders were fond of feeding the resident ducks – and

creek improvement proposal. It initiated a watershed-based planning study, imposed flood prevention requirements in new suburbs, and shifted its growth emphasis from suburban sprawl to urban densification. Nearly a quarter-century later, developers have internalized the

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consequently, were unwitting contributors to an excess of downstream nutrients. But their motives and aesthetic preferences were firmly on the side of what seemed most natural.

Powerful resistance also came from organized opponents of municipal tax increases. They had expected lower taxes because suburban growth had been bringing in so many new ratepayers. Instead, they had found their taxes rising to pay for new infrastructure and services. They saw the downstream creek channelization as yet another cost of sprawl dumped on the urban homeowner.

Moreover, they guessed that channelizing the first one-kilometre stretch of river beyond the city core would simply move potential flooding problems to the next stretch, which would then have to be improved, and so on through the other six downstream kilometres. The opponents foresaw an engineering boondoggle, with the first project leading inevitably to a succession of increasingly costly improvements.

In the end, the city withdrew the

costs of retention ponds, and water management authorities have come to equate improving the creek with rehabilitating and naturalizing it.

Many players have been involved in this still-incomplete transition, including the ecological activists and smart-growth advocates who have long been campaigning against thoughtless sprawl on Waterloo's west side. But the Laurel Creek improvement episode was a key turning point. And the voices that turned the tide were mostly concerned about their ducks, their wallets and their patch of residual wildness.

Most times, when a public issue emerges, the response is to gather together a bunch of like-minded folk for the needed resistance, advocacy or innovation. That seems sensible and sometimes it works.

But it's a strategy with serious limitations. For many worthy purposes – certainly for moving us all from an increasingly unsustainable path to something that might be desirable – the like-minded are too few and too weak. The unlike-minded offer a broader range of potential allies. **AV**