

# Uniting the Coast

## Pursuing a Vision for Georgian Bay

By John Carson,  
GBA President



**“The archipelago has an unusual community of interest in the preservation of the area.”**

– *The Archipelago Municipality, Georgian Bay Association with assistance of Professor Norman Pearson, April 1977*

The release of *The Archipelago Municipality* study by GBA over 40 years ago marked the beginning of GBA’s work to create a coastal municipality in the Thirty Thousand Islands archipelago. After several years of very hard work and political lobbying, a significant part of the vision was realized with the creation of the Township of the Archipelago (ToA) in 1980. That history is wonderfully

documented in the book *Passion for Georgian Bay*.<sup>1</sup> The creation of the Archipelago was a huge victory in the effort to preserve the pristine coast of eastern Georgian Bay. Since then, the Township has exemplified the values of environmental protection and sound stewardship of the coast’s important ecosystems since its founding. Those principles form the foundation of the Township’s strategic plan, and it continues to play a strong leadership role in those areas in the wider Georgian Bay community.

However, only part of the vision set out in the GBA’s initial studies promoting the coastal community were realized in 1980, primarily due to political decisions and

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Source: GBBR

<sup>1</sup> *Passion for Georgian Bay: The Founding of the Township of the Archipelago 1812-2012*, Michael Erkelenz, 2016. Available from The Nautical Mind, Toronto, [www.nauticalmind.com](http://www.nauticalmind.com)



circumstances at the time. Since then, the GBA has continued to promote the original vision of a broader coastal municipality when the opportunity to do so has arisen.

**“We have been left a legacy of unspoiled beauty – a recreational resource unmatched anywhere – let us with all our neighbours continue this endeavour for future generations of all the people of the Province of Ontario and its visitors.”**

– Open letter from the Georgian Bay Association re: proposed Georgian Bay Archipelago Municipality, April 1978 (signed by Wally King, President)

In 1996, Norman Pearson authored another study called *Vision 2020*. The study argued that many lakes in central Ontario and the southern part of the Bay were already under stress and proposed municipal reform as one response, including creating an archipelago entity “with a separate destiny from the inshore areas.”

**“Eastern Georgian Bay needs a compelling new vision for the next 25 years, to the year 2020, and beyond, if the future of this remarkable landscape is to be both protected and enhanced...”**

– Vision 2020: A New Paradigm for Eastern Georgian Bay, Georgian Bay Foundation (GBA), March 1996

The townships of the Archipelago and Georgian Bay made a proposal to the province to amalgamate as the Township of East Georgian Bay in 2000. But the province did not act on the proposal.

**“Our proposal is grounded in our common commitment to the Georgian Bay shoreline and its related watershed area.”**

– Proposal for a new Township of East Georgian Bay, Township of the Archipelago & Township of Georgian Bay, November 2000



Photo: John Carson

In 2004 the vision of uniting the eastern coast of the Bay was given new impetus when UNESCO recognized the Georgian Bay Biosphere Reserve (GBBR) as a biosphere reserve, affirming the unique biodiversity of the world's largest freshwater archipelago. The GBBR extends 175 km along the coast, from the Severn River to the French River.

A significant part of the coast is protected in the form of provincial and federal parks. More locations are protected every year as Georgian Bay Land Trust properties, and the province also holds thousands of acres of conservation reserves along the coast and its watersheds. Obtaining

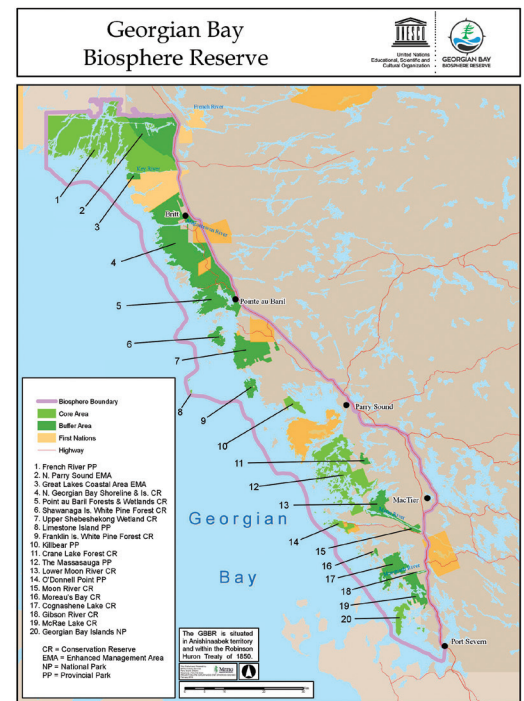
protected status for even more areas of our coast remains one of GBA's central objectives, and we continue to advocate for more parks and protected areas.

**Now 2020 is no longer a vision; it is upon us, and we are still working towards that broader vision of uniting the coast.**

When you read the history and the past reports quoted above, what is striking is how the case made for uniting the coast when those reports were written remains completely relevant today – indeed, arguably the points noted are even more relevant and persuasive now.

The latest opportunity to raise this issue arose with the Ontario government's current review of 73 lower-tier municipalities in eight districts plus Simcoe County, including the District of Muskoka and hence the Township of Georgian Bay. The province's plans are not clear yet, but its goal is to streamline municipal structures to achieve efficiencies and economies of scale. Amalgamation of all the municipalities in Muskoka is possible. GBA believes similar reviews could extend to other districts in future, including Parry Sound, raising the threat of other townships along the coast being merged with larger inland municipalities and towns that have few shared interests with coastal communities. We need to act to stop that from happening before it is too late, but to do so we need to present a viable, well-thought-out alternative that achieves a noble purpose.

**The case for an expanded coastal municipality is based on the community of interest and very similar vision for the region that our coastal communities share.** Our shared values are grounded on environmental protection, strong community engagement and sound stewardship of the Bay. As stated in



Source: GBBR

the paper that GBA released for consultation to our member associations this summer:

“The coastal townships share a very similar vision for the region, and also share many values based on environmental protection and sound stewardship of the GBBR. The Ontario government should recognize the unique nature of this shared vision and shared needs by ensuring that any municipal restructuring recognizes and protects the GBBR.”

– Georgian Bay Association position paper on a Coastal Municipality, July 2019



Photo: Karl Schiefer, PhD.

Of course, that case must be made to the province, which makes the decisions on creating and restructuring municipalities. What the province has in mind is currently unknown, but we believe it is vital to make the case for the optimal result, rather than just wait for a decision that may well be contrary to the interests of our coastal communities and will be cast in stone when it is made. It is an opportunity for the province to make a positive statement on the environment by strengthening governance of an internationally recognized ecological jewel.

Municipalities have built-in incentives to preserve the status quo, especially when things are running smoothly. As well, change is difficult, can be controversial, and brings risks that must be managed effectively. Those points are well illustrated through the history of debates on the structure of municipal

government in the Georgian Bay region over the last few decades.

**Despite those challenges, we think it is critical to keep the big picture in focus:** the strong shared interest of the coastal communities in preserving the natural environment of our archipelago. We should pursue a result that will best enable us to achieve that greater purpose. GBA must always be visionary in outlook and aim for the highest and best results in protecting what makes Georgian Bay special and unique.

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GBA fully recognizes that there are many issues to be analyzed and plans to be developed to ensure that coastal municipalities can be efficiently merged on terms that provide mutual benefits and reinforce, rather than detract from, their core values and strategies for their local communities. Any changes must make sense in terms of services to residents and property tax levels. And they must support the province's goals of increasing efficiencies in local government. In short, any consolidation of coastal municipalities must be win-win.

We recognize there is a lot of heavy lifting to be done in any effort to plan and implement a larger coastal municipality. GBA aims to be part of the solution and an effective contributor to those efforts.

We think those detailed issues can be resolved and the challenges can be overcome, especially given the strong shared values and interests, not to mention the goodwill that characterizes our communities. Let's not lose sight of the imperative to meet what is by far our biggest challenge in the face of unprecedented development pressures from southern Ontario: preserving and protecting Georgian Bay. ■

## GBA Forms Advisory Committee on Municipal Amalgamation

The GBA Board of Directors has approved the appointment of a special committee to advise GBA on issues relating to potential municipal amalgamations and to liaise with local communities on the issue. The committee is structured to balance representation from northern and southern areas that are currently part of this discussion.

Chair: **John Carson**, President, GBA, and Wah Wah Taysee Association in Township of Georgian Bay

Management: **Rupert Kindersley**, Executive Director, GBA, and Sans Souci Copperhead Association in Township of the Archipelago

**Andrew Hurlbut** – Director, GBA and Key River Area Association – North coast, unorganized townships of Harrison, Wallbridge, Henvey and Mowat

**Tom Scoon** – President, Pointe au Baril Islanders' Association – Township of the Archipelago North

**Pam Wing** – President, West Carling Association – Carling Township

**Eric Armour** – Director, GBA and President, Sans Souci Copperhead Association – Township of the Archipelago South

**Doug Carr** – Former Director, GBA, Cognashene Cottagers' Association and Honey Harbour Association – Township of Georgian Bay

**Brett Berman** – President, Prisque Road Association, Honey Harbour – Township of Georgian Bay