

Pioneer spirit revived

New hi-tech visitor centre to be built as Upper Canada Village looks to the future

MORRISBURG — At 85 years of age, Glen Cunningham had pretty much given up hope for Upper Canada Village.

Cunningham was there from the beginning ... from before the beginning, starting in 1957. Last week, during public consultations here on the future of UCV, for the first time in more than 30 years, he felt a ray of hope that his beloved pioneer settlement will be revitalized.

Before the village officially opened in 1961, Cunningham came on board as a carpenter to help assemble buildings displaced by floodwaters caused by St. Lawrence Seaway and power dam construction.

They became the core of the recreated settlement, a tourism attraction intended to compensate for some of the community upheaval generated by the government electricity production and international shipping projects.

Cunningham stayed on in various capacities until 1984 when he "couldn't take it anymore."

In his mind, poor planning and lack of vision set the site on a downhill course, eventually slashing yearly attendance by two-thirds from its glory days of about 380,000.

3rd attempt

One of the big cogs missing from the pioneer park was a visitor centre to orient UCV customers as to the historical periods they were about to witness. Cunningham recalls two previous attempts to establish such a centre which fell by the wayside.

Now it looks like third time lucky, with \$13 million allocated by the province to the St. Lawrence Parks Commission to construct a hi-tech visitor centre at the existing gates of the village.

It's intended to "wow" visitors with an "inviting, informative and compelling environment" before they enter UCV or adjacent Chrysler Heritage Park, which recalls the War of



TOM VAN DUSEN

1812.

Cunningham was all smiles during the consultation session, "thrilled" to be providing advice on how to rectify the "pathetic" situation at Upper Canada.

Commission CEO Pat Macdonald agreed the village is "tired and needs help." She hopes much of the renewal work will be completed in connection with the attraction's 50th anniversary in 2011.

Over the past several months, Macdonald has generated controversy among historical purists by indicating that, although the emphasis at UCV remains on live interpretation in showcasing early settlement life, the commission

also recognizes the "urgent need to re-invigorate the village experience" in order to attract more visitors and generate necessary funding.

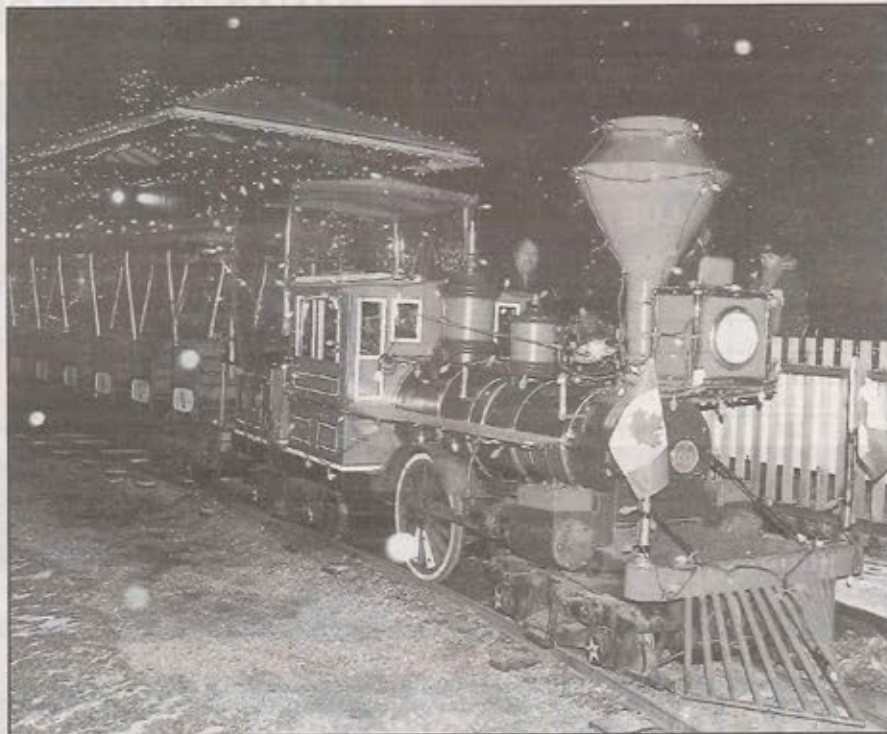
Special events

One of the contentious items is a concentration on special events such as Alight at Night and the Medieval Festival at Upper Canada, and Fort Fright at Old Fort Henry in Kingston, which is also managed by the commission.

Such events can't be ignored because they're now contributing 40% of annual visitor traffic. Macdonald said, adding that new events are being developed.

While the CEO was assailed for opening up Cook's Tavern in UCV to modern beer and wine imbibers, and for creating the Kettle Corner snack bar in the middle of the village, she said these two moves alone brought in another \$62,000 in revenue last season.

Ultimately, she said, the objective is to make parks commission attractions self-sufficient.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The miniature train that runs through part of Chrysler Park next to Upper Canada Village will be replaced by a faster model with a longer route that will include Chrysler Park Marina.

Plans on track to replace mini train

MORRISBURG — The "worn out" miniature train which chugs around a portion of Chrysler Park outside Upper Canada Village at a "depressing" speed is going to be replaced at a cost of \$2 million.

While she loves the train which has been riding the rails at the village since 1964, Pat Macdonald, who oversees the venerable attraction as CEO of the St. Lawrence Parks Commission, says it's time for a new, more environmentally friendly model, which can whisk sightseers around the park at twice the speed.

Describing a major new thrust to revive UCV during public consultations held

here last week, Macdonald said a number of companies are qualified to assemble a more accessible miniature train and bids will be sought from them.

During the summer season, the replica 1860s choo-choo circulates on narrow gauge tracks from a station at the village parking lot, past the Battle of Chrysler's Farm monument and along the St. Lawrence River to the beach where it loops back again.

Railway extension plans call for the new train to travel west all the way to Chrysler Park Marina and the actual site of a War of 1812 battle before heading back, with a stop at the refurbished Aultsville Sta-



PAT MACDONALD
Environmentally friendly train

tion. The new mini iron horse will be doing double duty, Macdonald explained, as a tourist attraction and as a transportation mode for people arriving by boat who want to visit the pioneer village. Passengers will be free to disembark and linger at various locations along the route, and re-board on the train's next pass.



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