

Our own Muskoka winning T.O. folks

Port Dover thrives as cottage choice without the traffic

By Dana Borcea

The Hamilton Spectator Port Dover (Aug 5, 2006)

The hot dogs aren't as tasty as Ester Leeson remembers.

And the orange drink is a little watered down.

But 31 years after the Jerseyville resident and her husband started making the drive to Port Dover for Arbor Restaurant's famous foot-long dogs and sugary Glow drink, Leeson is still coming back for more.

"It's tradition," said the 48-year-old yesterday on the patio of the famous beachside snack bar.

But it's more than nostalgia that brings her back.

Yesterday, Leeson was in Port Dover with her teenage daughter hoping to beat the long-weekend throngs and get in a little shopping.

While Leeson used to come to Port Dover for dates and "just to hang out," Sarah, 16, likes to visit the resort town for the stores.

A new crop of novelty shops and upgraded boutiques offer the teenager a unique selection of clothes and accessories her mom never had.

The downtown upgrade is part of a quiet evolution that's transforming the once simpler beach town on Lake Erie's north shore into a swankier destination for more moneyed day-trippers as well as empty-nesters looking for an alternative to pricey cottage country.

"It's a lot closer than Muskoka and the real estate is cheaper," said Leeson, who prefers to avoid the slog in traffic up north. "And it's nicer now. It's cleaned up."

Development is indeed humming in Port Dover.

Thousands of homes are slated for construction in the



The beach at Port Dover has long been an attraction to Hamilton residents. Its' gaining GTA visitors not wanting to face the traffic to the north.



The newly renovated Arbor still draws a crowd. The increasing popularity of the area is sending prices higher.



next few years, says Port Dover Port of Trade general manager Milly Coulthart.

"It's become quite the retirement community," she said.

"They're coming for the waterfront and the quality of life," said Coulthart. "Their money goes a longer way here."

But that draw is driving prices up in Port Dover as well.

Port Dover real estate appraiser Brenda Cooper says property values have been increasing between 7 per cent and 10 per cent annually for the past three years.

That's significantly more than in neighbouring resort towns. She pegs the range of newly built bungalows at \$160,000 to \$300,000.

Houses on the lake can fetch at least double that with some hovering around \$1-million.

"City dwellers have discovered Dover the way they did with Muskoka 10 years ago," said Cooper.

When Toronto resident William Eaton says he's going to the cottage, people usually assume he's going north. Instead, the 64-year-old retiree skips the bumper to bumper traffic and heads west and south to Port Dover instead.

The small bungalow perched above Dover's busiest stretch of sandy beach has been in his family since his grandfather built it in 1942.

The Brantford native has seen a lot of changes since then.

Though institutions such as the Erie Beach Hotel, with its famous perch dinners, survive, the stately change room or "bathhouse" is gone, replaced by public washrooms or "anywhere behind a bush."

So, too, is the Summer Gardens auditorium, where Eaton and his wife, Doreen, used to catch Ronnie Hawkins perform.

Doreen has also noticed the prices shoot up. "A large order of fries costs more than \$5 now."

The couple has heard locals grumbling that it's getting too busy around town.



With more people coming to town, business has picked up and spruced up. Ester and Sarah Leeson check out a main street shop.

Photos by Cathie Coward, the Hamilton Spectator

And William agrees.

"I think it's growing too fast," he said. "But compared to Toronto it's still a slower pace."