

Sent Via Facsimile: (416) 326-9338

May 13, 2009

The Honourable Monique Smith
Minister of Tourism
Queen's Park
Hearst Block, 9th Floor
Toronto, Ontario
M7A 2E1

Dear Minister Smith:

I am writing today to advise you of the devastating consequences to the visitor experience caused by major jobs cuts at Upper Canada Village. As you know, the St. Lawrence Parks Commission is making disturbing changes to the site with the help of a \$13 million grant from the Ontario government.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) represents the Commission's employees. When our members from Upper Canada Village met with you on April 2, the union understood that 20 per cent of the workforce at the site would be laid off. Your response was that at least the remaining 80 per cent would still have a job.

Now that the cuts have been made, the result is that close to 50 per cent of the interpretive staff have been eliminated. These job cuts, in tandem with the growing commercialization of the site, will have a hugely negative impact on the visitor experience.

When Upper Canada Village opens May 16, the following changes will be in place:

- 1) Large sections of the site will be closed on a rotating basis. Each day, for three to four hours at a time, one-third of the buildings will be off limits to visitors because they will not be staffed. As well, the buildings contain precious historic artifacts, many of which have been donated by local families. These heritage homes will be vulnerable to theft and vandalism.
- 2) Animation of life in the Village by trained interpreters and artisans in period costume will be greatly reduced. **With close to half of the interpretive staff - 39 of about 80 – not returning**, interpretation will be mostly limited to strictly-scheduled demonstrations within the tight confines of buildings that don't easily accommodate groups over 10 people.

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- 3) Increased commercialization of the site that includes the conversion of a rare 1820s heritage building, Cook's Tavern, into a restaurant and bar. This corruption of the building has involved the removal of all historic artifacts and furniture from the main floor in order to retrofit the building with modern food service appliances, including a double-sided beer fridge and stainless steel sinks.

These destructive changes are being implemented with no prior consultation with key stakeholders, such as local heritage societies and employees.

The parks commission's changes to Upper Canada Village do not respect the site's heritage values or its educational mandate. They undermine its appeal to the thousands of visitors who visit each year to be immersed in the sights, sounds and smells of 19th century Ontario village life.

We are concerned, ultimately, that these changes will drive away visitors, including school and tour groups. As you know, Parks of the St. Lawrence is the single greatest generator of tourist activity in the St. Lawrence Corridor. A precipitous decline in visitors to the parks will have a major impact on the region's economy.

The St. Lawrence Parks Commission reports to your Ministry. We urge you, Minister, to take immediate action and order the immediate reversal of these destructive changes. They do not respect the past and will not lead us into a viable future for this much-loved and respected living history museum.

Sincerely,

Warren (Smokey) Thomas
President

WT/mp

c: Dalton McGuinty, Premier, MPP, Ottawa South,
Jim Watson, MPP, Ottawa West-Nepean,
John Gerretsen, MPP, Kingston and the Islands
Jim Brownell, MPP, Stormont-Dundas-South Glengarry
Jean-Marc Lalonde, MPP, Glengarry-Prescott -Russell
Bob Runciman, Leader, Progressive Conservative Party, MPP,
Leeds-Grenville,
Paul Miller, NDP Critic for Tourism, MPP, Hamilton East-Stoney Creek
Brian Dunham, president, OPSEU Local 453