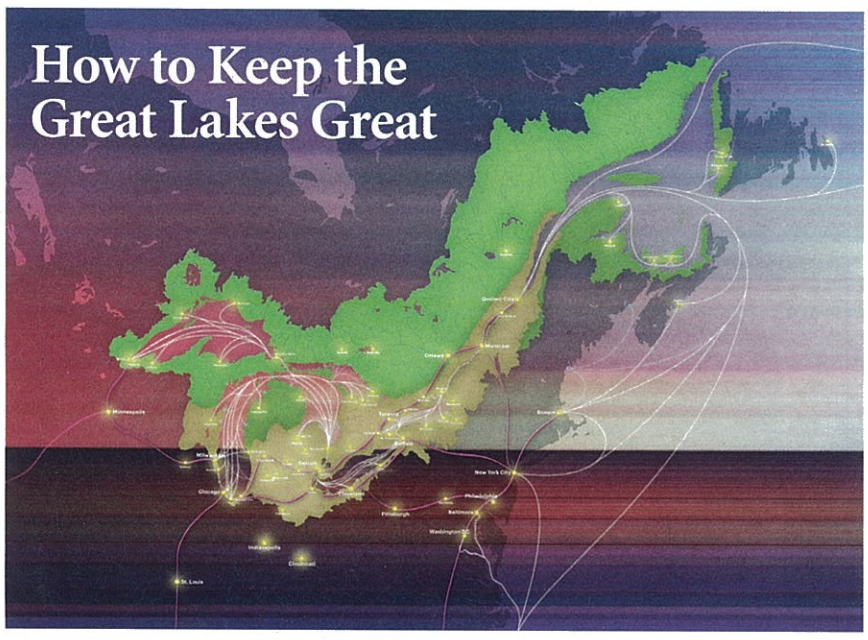
How to Keep the Great Lakes Great



Skidmore, Owings & Merrill Chief Planner Philip Enquist is a lead author of the firm's The Great Lakes Century Vision Plan, which says the future of the Great Lakes region depends on its environmental governance. More than 100 years after Daniel Burnham famously planned Chicago, Enquist and his colleagues at SOM are taking up the pro bono cause of sowing cooperation throughout the Great Lakes region. For a natural resource rallying cry, it's a decidedly urban initiative. Chris Bentley, *AN*'s midwest editor, asks about algal blooms, unwieldy regional governments, and whether it might be time to make a strong statement on urban sprawl in the Midwest.

CB: What's new with the initiative? I'd love to report on some movement with the plan at large or on any of its individual actions and recommendations. We're now almost 5 years out from its adoption, not to mention 105 years after Burnham's plan.

PE: There are a number of things we see that in general point to a much greater awareness, which is the first step. I think there's a notable shift in the way mayors, community groups talk about the Great Lakes. This is beyond a resource—it's now seen as an incredible asset for rebuilding, repositioning this midwest region of North America.

When we first started talking about it, you would sit with economics groups and business leaders and it was all about jobs, and absolutely no discussion on environmental repair or improvement. You'd sit with environmental groups and they would see the discussion of jobs being a further erosion of the environment. Now I think we're seeing a much more comfortable level within a lot of different groups talking about all aspects.

For example, agriculture was never in the mix. You asked have things changed. I think Toledo is a phenomenal lightning rod of what happens when you don't talk between silos. The agricultural nutrients are really at blame here for these massive algae blooms, and they've known about it for years and years. In a way this wasn't any surprise. I think it's as powerful as when the Cuyahoga River caught on fire.

A few other things. We were just meeting with folks from the Urban Land Institute (ULI) from Toronto and they showed us some very interesting charts. Even though their city is growing and urbanizing, it's using less water in the process. So that's a very good sign that cities are starting to use less water per person based on technology.

I've heard a lot of talk about regionalism over the past few years. Have you seen something that might constitute a real regionalism, beyond rhetoric? What actions, and from whom?

I just was meeting with district council of the Urban Land Institute. It included leaders from Minneapolis, Chicago, Toronto, Northern Indiana, and others. This group is acting as a regional collaborator. Their mission is urban quality of life, health of cities. They were meeting with me to hear more about Great Lakes to see if this was an initiative they could rally the ULI around. These guys are mostly real estate developers. Here they are coming to talk about this and openly expressing concerns of "who owns something this big? Is it a state entity, a federal entity?" I was hoping cities could start collaborating and say, "look we've got to get our act together around the quality of this water and the health of this region, and it ties into our own economic health."

Personally I feel like we, as a self-funded entity, we do seem to be getting heard, but whether it leads to action or not, it's hard for us to see. I just don't feel we're seeing anybody hook into it in a big way and committing dollars to it differently than they would have normally. I don't want to be negative but I still feel like we're sort of out there alone.

We've used the lakes to support carbon-based industries. You've talked about developing a comprehensive energy plan for the region. Are the energy resources of the Great Lakes sufficient to sustain economic growth without fossil fuels?

Our carbon footprint is very big in the Midwest. There should be money set aside for two things. One, continued research in energy efficiency. And the second is we look for alternative energy sources that are clean. We have to not abandon renewable energy. Is there a way

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to think about getting all the cities around the Great Lakes off of coal?

What about the growing pipeline infrastructure around the Great Lakes, do you think that's a threat to the future of the Great Lakes?

It is. I heard Lisa Jackson of the Environmental Protection Agency say the old oil lines that are all throughout the Great Lakes region, some of them date back to the 1910s, 1920s, they're not in good shape and they don't even know who owns what. So when one leaks, there's a great threat to the Great Lakes.

I don't want to be all doomsday. I think the things we do day-to-day create a degraded environment. So agricultural practices, energy, and governance that cause a lack of incentive to restore these areas are the big culprits to focus on.

Let's talk water. The Great Lakes Compact sets stringent limits on withdrawing from outside the basin, which seems pretty much in line with the public's aversion to sending our freshwater to, say, the Southwest. But is there a way to sustainably modify those restrictions? Or is the answer to restrict development in areas without a forward-looking water plan?

I think the Great Lakes Compact is one of best things to happen. It shows collaboration at international levels. It shows commitment that you're not going to let individual landowners pump out aquifers and sell that water to other cities like they do in Texas. In the Great Lakes we have the water but we still tend to use it to transport waste away. So I think that the growing Great LAKES Water Institute [managed by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee] is a wonderful thing. Continued research on water filtration technology is really great.

What about challenges to the restrictions laid out in the Compact, like from suburban Waukesha, Wisconsin, which is out of the basin but wants Lake Michigan water?

I would absolutely restrict development. I think it's time to say the solution here is to be urban. We have to be more compact. We have to be building at higher densities, we have to be reinvesting in the communities we've already built. We can grow—we don't need new greenfield developments. It's time to just say that, maybe.

Chicago, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland—all could double their populations on their existing infrastructure, because they've lost that much in population already. The region could grow but the urban footprint doesn't have to grow.

What sort of policies need to change for that to happen?

There are a couple things. Toronto has this Ontario greenbelt that's really remarkable. It's a huge sweep of open land that goes behind Toronto all the way to St. Catherine. This is a way of preventing sprawl, although there is leapfrog development on the other side. They tried to prevent sprawl, they tried to protect the areas that would filter water back to Lake Ontario. It's a reflection of strong provincial governments and weak city governments. In the United States it's almost impossible to do something like this. But wouldn't it be great to define your urban growth boundaries, and then back up your cities with extensive green-belts. You openly agree to concentrated development and stop the sprawl. We can't keep building these mindless housing developments at two units per acre out in the middle of nowhere and expect the roads to be built for free.

The business-as-usual model is like the end of the world. "Let's just keep removing farmland and wetlands." In the next 10–20 years we could easily lose 6,000 square miles of open space to sprawling cities. What's happening to our aquifers and our surface bodies of water? Nobody cares, nobody knows. I think it's time to say that this post-war automobile sprawl that's been going on for 60 years is over. It's done. This is just an urban designer talking.

I've heard you say Great Lakes issues haven't gotten their due, but also that now is the dawn of a new green century—what are some misconceptions you've had to battle about the challenges facing the Great Lakes?

It's frustrating to try to keep talking about this because you don't see a lot of action. You see some interest, you see some controversy, but you don't see a lot of actions. But maybe they're there and they haven't been summarized yet. I'd like to equate this to where the energy industry was in the 1970s, when nobody was talking about energy efficiency. In fact, energy demands have gone down since then even though population has gone up. We're kind of there now with water. Part of that is just water is still a cheap resource, still seen as a cheap or free thing.

I think warmer climates, more lake evaporation, more severe storms, more sewage overflow from cities into the lakes—those are all actually bigger threats than the Asian carp. What cities are putting in the water—pharmaceuticals, plastic waste. A lot of people think that the Great Lakes are being taken care of, or they're too big to fail. But I think they're very vulnerable. With climate change they're even more vulnerable.

This is all about human health and a higher quality of life. We can't have a high quality of life if we do it at the expense of the environment. I think in the 21st Century, we've got to find this balance. And that's really changing our urban planning practice completely. We always need to step forward to understand the larger ecosystem.