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Outdoor enthusiasts marvel at the beauty of Merritt Island, a natural paradise just steps from downtown.

Welland a sport tourism destination

Recreational canal 'has this wonderful second life'

LINDA WHITE

Special to Postmedia Network

When George Barkwell moved to Welland some 20 years ago, he knew little about his new hometown but the already active rower was thrilled to discover he was living in one of the truly authentic recreational canal cities in Canada.

"At first, I found the canal divided the community into the east side and the west side but with development and activities, we've found that it brings everybody together," says Barkwell, a chartered professional accountant and director of coach and athlete development at Notre Dame Rowing Club.

"The canal was originally built for commerce to move goods between the Great Lakes...but now has this wonderful second life," he says. "There's nothing more pleasurable than to be on the canal early on a Sunday morning in the summer with the crews I'm training. You see the city from a whole different perspective and there's all this wildlife around. One day, I stood up in the launch and said to everybody, 'This is heaven!'"

Welland is nestled in the heart of picturesque Niagara Region and is a one-and-a-half-hour drive to Toronto and 45 minutes from Buffalo, N.Y. It's home to Niagara College and is a short jaunt to Brock Univer-

sity in neighbouring St. Catharines. The Welland International Flatwater Centre offers two water courses and hosts major international sporting events, including the 2017 National Dragon Boat Championships.

The 2018 Canoe Polo World Championships will welcome 550 athletes, coaches and officials from 26 countries. Summer music festivals are held at the 750-seat Merritt Park Amphitheatre. Located on the east bank of the recreational waterway, it overlooks a floating stage on the water.

People are taking notice. In addition to issuing a record number of building permits last year, Welland also saw the highest number of residential units constructed, with 223 compared to the 2008-2016 average of 151 units. "A lot of that growth is simply due to active migration from the Greater Toronto and Hamilton areas," says Mayor Frank Campion.

"Some people are moving here because they're retiring. Some have lived here in the past and are returning. Some are even willing to commute from Welland to Toronto or Welland to Hamilton. The GO Train will be coming to Niagara in a couple of years and people are getting in while the prices are still very good."

Luxury condominium builder Plazacorp is planning to construct seniors' residential developments along the canal. "Some of the lands along the canal are brownfields...We

have great incentives for brownfield remediation," says Campion, who lists waterfront development among his primary goals.

The community is awaiting details on private sector partnership that will pave the way for new residential development projects. The city also looks forward to welcoming new commercial and industrial investments that will create jobs — good news for this city of 52,300, which is projected to grow by 18,070 by 2041.

Part of the preparation for that growth includes offering employment. "Historically, Welland was a heavy manufacturing community but a lot of heavy industry disappeared from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s," Campion says. "We're getting back into manufacturing and the economy is starting to pick up."

Case in point: General Electric Co. chose Welland as the site for a state-of-the-art gas-engine plant that's being shifted from south of the border. The 'brilliant factory' combines digital technology and lean manufacturing to produce power generation machinery for global markets. It will create 220 jobs when it's fully operational this year.

All that adds up to a community that's home for people like Barkwell. "There's a closeness here," he says. "Coming here, I didn't know anything about the city. Now, I won't leave. I'm here for life."



Concerts on the Canal is a free concert series that runs all summer long. Artists perform on a floating stage set on the recreational waterway.



Welland, also known as Rose City, has hosted an annual Rose Festival since 1961. Events include a children's derby, coronation ball and street dance.



The community's diverse ethnic roots are reflected at the Welland Farmer's Market, which is known also for its 'buy local,' 'eat healthy' philosophy.



Bridge 13, located in downtown Welland, is illuminated with brilliant LED lights every evening. (Photos by Anthony Gallaccio and City staff.)