

LAKE ERIE: CLEVELAND, OHIO

*Whiskey Island: Restoring Cleveland's  
only natural shoreline*

GREAT LAKES RESTORATION: ONE COMMUNITY AT A TIME





*Democratic decision-making is a grand experiment. It sounds lofty. It resonates with our stated national values. It's an ideal we say we would fight for at all costs.*

IN CLEVELAND, OHIO, AN INDUSTRIAL CITY AND BUSY GREAT LAKES PORT, THERE IS A SMALL ISLAND IN THE ONCE BURNING CUYAHOGA RIVER, WHICH CONTAINS THE LAST REMAINING NATURAL SHORELINE IN THE CITY. THIS ISLAND OFFERED AN OPPORTUNITY TO PROTECT AND RESTORE A SHORELINE AND A COMMUNITY'S CONNECTION TO THIS NATURAL RESOURCE. COULD THE CITIZENS' VOICES, ASKING FOR THE PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF THIS PLACE BE HEARD BY MUNICIPAL LEADERS THROUGH THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS?





Democratic decision-making is a grand experiment. It sounds lofty. It resonates with our stated national values. It's an ideal we say we would fight for at all costs.

But on the ground and in practice democracy often takes tenacious, creative effort. Sometimes democracy works best on election day, but sometimes it takes a big step forward when a county commissioner is running—literally running, in jogging shoes through part of the district he or she represents. Sometimes a citizen sees an opportunity to make democracy stronger and more responsive to people and places.

One evening about 8 years ago, Ed Hauser saw Cuyahoga County Commissioner Tim McCormack running along the lakefront of Whiskey Island, which is actually a peninsula and the only place in downtown Cleveland, Ohio, that still had natural shoreline on Lake Erie. Though he only knew the commissioner slightly, Hauser rolled down his window and teased McCormack, “What are you doing on the lakefront enjoying yourself?” As the two talked, Hauser explained how he had been working to preserve the island. McCormack accepted an invitation to tour Whiskey Island, and democracy got a restorative dose of community involvement that put citizens back at the center of the decision-making process, right where we belong.

For Hauser, founding chairman of the Friends of Whiskey Island, getting the elected officials of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County to protect and restore Whiskey Island became an “experiment in civics.” His short-term goal was to protect a natural resource, but the larger vision he imagined was of an open process for city and county officials to make decisions that include citizen input.

Hauser's efforts have taught him many lessons that should resonate with every citizen of a society that calls itself a democracy.

“Citizens think they have no power,” Hauser observes, so they are often reluctant to speak up to city planners, mayors, and other elected or appointed officials.

“I speak in a very gentle voice, with facts. I do my research and homework, and hand in a copy for the record. And there's no reason to raise my voice. That's my technique. And the citizens say, ‘Well, this guy's standing up for what he believes.’”



*Ed Hauser, Chairman,  
Friends of Whiskey Island*





*The County has restored two-thirds of the shoreline, removing trash and*



*Restoration work at Whiskey Island was a community effort. Friends of Whiskey Island members helped with the restoration work (photo by)*







*and debris and replacing invasive species with natives.*

What Hauser encountered at Whiskey Island was the often confusing world of multiple levels of government having differing visions for a place and its development. In 1998, after reading about plans by the Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Port Authority, an appointed body serving at the discretion of the city and county government, Hauser decided to attend the public meeting scheduled by the Port Authority. At this meeting Hauser described his interest in the area as a boat-owner. He also heard that Port Authority officials basically intended to turn the entire island into a gravel storage location and a loading dock. The meeting convinced Hauser that the Port Authority had predetermined its agenda for the island without consulting with the public.

Without initially planning to do so, Hauser and the nonprofit Friends of Whiskey Island that he founded in 1999, inserted themselves in the critical role of citizens as the nexus for a more transparent process of city planning and as conveyors of new ideas for the property to benefit the city and its citi-

zens. The Friends of Whiskey Island were able to help thousands of citizens convey their wishes to see this place protected and restored to local officials with the authority to make such decisions.

A week after being assured by the Port chairman that the process was going to be open and transparent, Hauser saw in a local business magazine that the Port Authority made an offer to purchase Whiskey Island. Hauser felt the promise was not being kept, and the planning process was neither open to public input, nor open to change based on citizen participation. Later he would discover that the City and the Port Authority had also made its plans without coordinating with Cuyahoga County, which was working on greenspace planning throughout the county.

Hauser knew there was hope for Whiskey Island when he approached the Island's owner and was assured of his support for preserving the green space.

That's when the Friends of Whiskey Island started their campaign. They used every opportunity to share

*Left, Ed Hauser, Matt Zone; photo far right, Ed Hauser, Peter Greisinger)*





*Ed Hauser and Peter Greisinger share their knowledge of the property at the festival. Paul Alsenas, Greisinger, Hauser, and Commissioner McCormack accept an award from the Ohio Environmental Council for the protection and restoration of Whiskey Island.*

the island's story and its positive potential for Cleveland and tell people how to help—presenting, displaying, and distributing information at public events and community meetings, on their website, by email, meetings with elected officials, and simply word-of-mouth. Significant press coverage was critical to building awareness. Between 1998 and 2006, there were at least 71 articles published about the plans and proposals for Whiskey Island, including seven editorial letters on behalf of the Friends.

The Ohio Environmental Council (OEC) and the Northeast Ohio Watershed Council were also instrumental in building public support to convince elected officials to protect the Island for public enjoyment. The OEC represents citizens' interest statewide. The Watershed Council, formed by the OEC in 2001 to focus on issues such as local watershed restoration, represents 15-20 citizen-based groups throughout northeast Ohio. This partnership demonstrated broad support statewide, regionally, and locally for protection of Whiskey Island.

The Friends and allies built public involvement by collecting signatures on position statements, letters of support, and petitions, and encouraging citizens to speak up at many public meetings. The Friends alone submitted over 3,700 petition signatures and 3,000 letters of support in favor of a restored and protected Whiskey Island to elected officials,

and notified the various other stakeholders and the press. The Friends' email list included all of the relevant elected officials, government agencies, organizations and the media, in addition to concerned citizens. Regularly informing stakeholders of the Friends' activities and positions helped keep their agenda in the forefront.

The County, led by Commissioner McCormack, played a leadership role with its inclusion of Whiskey Island in the Cuyahoga County Greenspace Plan. Through Hauser's efforts, Commissioner McCormack understood the strong public support for the Island and how people had bemoaned limited access to the lakefront for years. He understood well how beneficial Whiskey Island could be for the area—both economically and environmentally.

When he showed fellow Commissioner Jimmy Dimora the property and Dimora was equally convinced, they agreed the County should buy it. The Commissioners knew the money was available in the County's general fund. They saw a window of opportunity for taking the first practical, critical step in reclaiming Cleveland's waterfront for public use, and they took it. The County acquired Whiskey Island on December 20, 2004 for \$6.25 million. The arrangement included a \$250,000 contribution from the private owner for restoration work. In return, the green space has been named Wendy

*A record 7,000 people turned out for the 2006 Burning River Fest held at Island Advocate, Ed Hauser called the 2006 festival, "The proudest day of*





*Cleveland residents have embraced the recreational opportunities at Whiskey Island flocking to the Burning River Fest and enjoying the grounds on Labor Day.*

Park after his daughter.

The County has restored two-thirds of the shoreline, removing trash and debris and replacing invasive species with natives.

Even after the County acquired the property, however, the Port continued to pursue its plans with an eminent domain claim and intent to purchase the property. Again, the Friends and the Watershed Council led an unprecedented level of public activity, demonstrating citizens' displeasure with the Port's actions and rejection of its proposals. Public scrutiny of the Port's plans was furthered when Commissioner Dimora began his own investigation.

On July 15, 2005, the Port withdrew its eminent domain claim and interest in purchasing Whiskey Island without explanation. Once again, public involvement made the difference.

The Friends of Whiskey Island and OEC are now promoting transfer of Whiskey Island to the Cleveland Metroparks for maintenance and operation, and to finally remove the threat of acquisition by the Port Authority. The Friends have collected over 3,000 letters of support to date. However the experiment isn't entirely finished. The Port Authority's draft plan for its future marina development depicted expansion to the 10-acres Whiskey Island Marina basin as a bulk stone facility. Hopefully,

Whiskey Island will become a part of the Metroparks soon—ensuring long-term protection.

Through Ed Hauser's civic experiment, the Friends of Whiskey Island and its allies saw a threat to a hidden gem along Cleveland's lakeshore and turned it into a victory for the environment, the entire community, and for the process of democracy. They did so by exposing people to the public benefits of the site, engaging them in the decision-making processes, presenting sustainable economic development options, and working with the media to challenge City and Port officials to be more open in their planning processes. The County, for its part, has helped restore public trust in government by responding to public support with action.



**Commissioner McCormack**



*Whiskey Island.  
my life."*

*Commissioners Dimora and McCormack attend Whiskey Island Day to celebrate the County's purchase of the property.*

**Commissioner Dimora**





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Its purchase of the property could not have happened without the foundation of public support laid down by years of citizen efforts, the Friends, the OEC, and the Watershed Council combined to

guide the Commissioners' decision. Public involvement and the communication of citizen ideas can empower elected officials to do what is right for our democracy and our Great Lakes.

Restoring the Great Lakes happens—one community at a time. Every community that undertakes a project to restore the health of the lakes, rivers, wetlands, and shorelines brings great benefits. The benefits of restoration include—economic stimulation, healthier ecosystems, more livable communities, and involved and engaged citizens. In turn, these community by community restorations help improve the overall health of our Great Lakes system as a whole by healing the thousand small cuts that have been inflicted on this global treasure one by one by one.

Additional materials and stories are available at [www.freshwaterfuture.org](http://www.freshwaterfuture.org) and additional copies of this packet are available by calling (231) 348-8200 or emailing [info@freshwaterfuture.org](mailto:info@freshwaterfuture.org).



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