

Visitor centre taking shape [at Old Fort Erie]

By JOHN ROBBINS, REVIEW STAFF WRITER
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FORT ERIE — The steel frame of a building is rising along the waterfront in Fort Erie.

No, it's not the controversial condominium tower at Bay Beach.

It's the new visitor centre at Old Fort Erie.

Construction of the multi-million dollar, state-of-the-art facility is well underway.

And although work was slowed by bad weather in October, Niagara Parks Commission officials say the project is still on track to open next spring.

"We're a little bit behind, but we hope to have everything up and running for May," said Jim Hill, the NPC's superintendent of heritage. "And I think I can say we're going to aim for a grand opening on Canada Day." Last March, the federal and provincial governments announced a grant of \$8.94-million for revitalization projects at three heritage sites within the Niagara Parks system -- Old Fort Erie, Laura Secord Homestead and McFarland House.



The bulk of the money will be used to build the visitor centre at the Old Fort, where plans include a museum, theatre, archive workspace, public restrooms and storage space. In addition, the overall plan calls for construction of earthworks to replicate those that would have been in place during the summer and fall of 1814 when the fort was occupied by the American army and was under siege by the British and their Canadian and Native allies.

The Old Fort is one of the most significant heritage properties in the Niagara region.

It was the scene of intense fighting during the summer and fall of 1814, during the last American invasion of Canada.

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One of the bloodiest battlefields in Canada, more than 3,000 soldiers were killed or wounded there during the siege. Many soldiers were buried close to where they fell.

The fort was abandoned during the 1820s and fell into ruins. It was briefly occupied during the Fenian Raids of 1866.

The fort, in its current configuration, was rebuilt with federal and provincial funding in the late 1930s and was one of many depression-era make-work projects.

A grand opening of the visitors' centre on Canada Day would coincide with the 72nd anniversary of the reopening of the rebuilt fort to the public on July 1, 1939.

A Canada Day grand opening would also tie in nicely with the annual Fort Erie Friendship Festival, which traditionally spans the July 1-4 holidays in Canada and the United States, said Hill.

Construction isn't the only work that has been going on in recent months.

Public broadcaster WNET Buffalo/Toronto is busy working on an educational film that will be shown in the theatre inside the visitors' centre.

Hill said the film will be seven or eight minutes long.

In addition, a 30-minute film chronicling the Siege of Fort Erie is being produced for broadcast locally. This film may be shown from time to time at the visitors' centre.

"If we had a request, say from a teacher or someone who wanted the longer presentation, we'll show the half an hour version," said Hill.