

Environmental crusader still fighting



Oshawa-born Jim Richards fought to preserve the Second Marsh and is optimistic he'll have the same success putting a stop to the proposed garbage incinerator.

By Jessica Verge
The Oshawa Express

Forty years after he first garnered attention as a fearless environmentalist, Jim Richards is just as passionate and outspoken as ever.

At age 65, the man credited with saving the Second Marsh is on a new crusade to protect the health and welfare of local wildlife and residents alike.

"This is a major health hazard," says Richards of the Region of Durham's proposed plan to build a garbage incinerator in Clarington.

Since the notion of the incinerator first appeared on regional agendas, Richards has been following the issue, attending public information sessions and speaking out against it before municipal councils throughout Durham.

"The public has been short-changed on the whole agenda," says Richards, who is urging residents throughout the region to get involved and learn how the incinerator affects them.

Richards believes, with enough public attention, plans to build an incinerator can be stopped.

"I'm always optimistic," he says.

And if past successes are any indication of future victories, Richards has reason to be hopeful.

"I've spent a whole lifetime standing up for what I believe in," says

Richards, who was born and raised in Oshawa and now makes his home in Orono.

In 1966, as a General Motors line worker, Richards, a high school dropout, became known in Oshawa as a naturalist, a nature lover with an interest "in the pursuit of all things wild," he says.

It was this passion that inspired Richards to speak up when the federally mandated Oshawa Harbour Commission announced city-supported plans to expand and create a deep-sea port, which would see the destruction of a neighbouring wetland, the Second Marsh.

"I didn't blame [the Harbour Commission] for having a dream but, at the same time, I had a dream," says Richards. "My dream was, let's save it."

By 1969, his fight to save the Second Marsh was in full swing, though support was hard to find.

"There wasn't much help out there," says Richards, whose passion for conserving wildlife and vegetation was shared by few others at that time.

Unable to get a letter to the

editor published and banned from appearing before local service clubs to share his side, public criticism was fierce and often left Richards feeling like an outsider. During a radio interview, Richards had a caller accuse him of being anti-jobs, anti-progress and anti-Oshawa.

Despite this, he says he was never tempted to give up.

In 1970, media attention started to increase and helped to shed light on his fight. In 1972, Richards formed the Second Marsh Defense Association and, by 1984, he succeeded in convincing both city council and the federal government to put a stop to plans to expand the port and ruin the marsh.

Richards would spend the next seven years urging the city to take ownership of the Second Marsh, which he says had been devastatingly damaged by the Harbour Commission and required extensive, costly improvements.

Richards was able to convince the Ministry of the Environment to donate \$1 million to the

come the idea of being neighbours with GM either. However, with guidelines in place to ensure the building would have a minimal impact on the surrounding environment—including a structure height low enough to accommodate migratory birds, a muted colour and donating 51 per cent of the property as open space—Richards was on board with GM's project.

In 1991, he was taken out of the car plant and given a position at the headquarters that put him in charge of the open space, now known as the McLaughlin Bay Wildlife Reserve. It was a position he used to get Oshawa residents actively involved in the park and he recruited volunteers to plant trees and build birdhouses.

Due to cutbacks at GM, Richards took an early retirement in 1997, returning on contract to finish his work.

Two years ago, Richards stepped down from the executive director post he'd held with Friends of the Second Marsh for 32 years.

While he no longer receives a paycheck for being an environmentalist, it's a pursuit Richards, a husband, father of two and grandfather, won't ever give up.

An interest in the environment began when Richards was a preteen and would wander

through the woods, making sketches and then researching at the library things that he saw. He had a particular interest in birds and kept a diary of their nests, as well as the types of trees and bushes in which they were found and the vegetation and wildflowers around them. Richards says his passion for birding (bird-watching) is one he will always have.

Richards hopes that when it comes to the incinerator, other residents will share his concerns, though he believes few people strive to be activists these days. While the public in the 60s had an attitude that you couldn't fight the government, Richards believes people are now apathetic.

"People are just generally lazy," he says.

But Richards hopes other will speak out against the incinerator, or at least educate themselves about important issues such as that. It is what he'll continue to do.

"I'm just trying to do what I think is right," he says.

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- Jim Richards

cleanup, at which time the Second Marsh Defense Association became Friends of the Second Marsh and registered as a charity.

While working full-time as an inspector at GM's car plant, Richards was provided with city office space from which to run the newly renamed organization and create a rehabilitation and management plan, which is still used today. After Friends of the Second Marsh managed to raise nearly a \$1 million themselves, the attitude of local residents toward environmental causes changed. The marsh got the improvements it needed.

Though the Second Marsh had been declared a provincially protected wetland, Richards' struggle to protect it continued.

In the early 90s, GM administrators were seeking a new location for their Oshawa headquarters and expressed interest in purchasing a plot of land near Second Marsh. Richards' had succeeded in chasing away chemical, cement, steel and fertilizer manufacturers and didn't wel-