A week along the water:

A vision of the Ohio Lake Erie waterfront in 2050

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Prologue
I can’t wait. I have a whole week to bike along the Ohio Lake Erie Greenway. I’m going from Toledo to Cleveland, with some short side trips along the way. It will be around 200 miles.

I’m surprised I’ve never done this before. Thousands of people do this ride -- more and more every year. They come from all over to experience one of the best greenway trails in the country. Although I’ve been involved in Ohio coastal issues for a long time and I’ve traveled along many parts of the lakefront, I’ve never biked such a long stretch at once. This is a chance to get the full, amazing experience.

I’ve decided to record my thoughts along way. There have been many professionally produced virtual reality films about riding Ohio’s Fresh Coast, but not many people know the history of how this resource was created. I’ve been doing some research and have been talking to some of the old-time lakefront activists, and I hope to fill in some of the history. It’s an interesting story.

Most people have forgotten just how bad the Ohio lakefront used to be. There used to be very little public access to the lake -- only a few miles of Ohio’s 312-mile shoreline. Most of the lakefront was privately owned or taken up by public uses, such as wastewater treatment plants and highways, which blocked access to the water.

This started to change about 40 years ago. Cities such as Cleveland, Lorain, and Sandusky started to reclaim their waterfrotns for public access. In addition, conservation organizations and park districts began to focus more on preserving coastal land.

But the idea of a continuous, open lakefront in Ohio really took off around 2017 when a group called the Green Ribbon Coalition worked with then Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur and others to do a study on the economic benefits of a much larger public lakefront. The study showed the property tax values and job increases that would result if the state purchased lakefront properties. Instead of a single row of shoreline properties having enhanced value from being on the water, whole communities would increase in value because everyone would be able to enjoy the water. The coalition then led a campaign to persuade the state to create a bond fund, modeled on the popular Clean Ohio Fund, which was earmarked for the purchase of lakefront land. Up to $10 million per year has been available since 2020, and over the years it has allowed the purchase of hundreds of properties. The amount of public access has nearly doubled to 120 miles, and the long-term goal is 156 miles, or half of the Ohio shoreline.

As predicted, this has been a good investment. Increased tax revenues have more than repaid the cost. And, by creating a world-class, waterfront greenway on a grand scale, the state has developed a new identity for offering an incredible quality of life. People want to live here. Companies want to be located along the lakefront greenway. Coastal tourism has doubled, with Ohio’s eight coastal counties now contributing more than 50% of the state’s tourism revenue, up from 28% in 2015.

The Green Ribbon Coalition also played a big role in coordinating the strategic planning about land acquisition and the trail system to link the new, public open spaces along the lake. The group convened stakeholders -- including federal agencies, ODNR, ODOT, park districts, land trusts, and lakefront communities. The planning process set priorities and identified the kind of lakefront properties that would meet multiple objectives -- connectivity of large blocks of greenspace, ecological quality, proximity to people, availability on the market, etc.

Now there are attractive access points every few miles, as well as many long, multi-mile stretches of public
lakefront. Some are natural -- bluffs, beaches, wetlands, river estuaries. Others are urban -- boardwalks, promenades, parks and active greenspaces. All are free, democratic places that invite everyone to experience the lake. And all the pieces are connected by a safe, separated trail that never strays far from shore. Beyond Ohio, the trail continues almost completely around Lake Erie.

All this has not only changed how outsiders view this part of Ohio, it has changed how the people who live here think about their home. Many more people think about the lake and feel connected to it. It has become a profound part of their lives.

**Day 1**

Wherever you are in Toledo, it’s easy to get to the city bike network and then link to the Ohio Lake Erie Greenway. There’s a cool trail crossing of the Maumee River on the old Craig Bridge, just below the dramatic Toledo Skyway Bridge that carries I-280. Then you go about 5 miles downriver to the lake. This area used to be dominated by a BP Oil Refinery and the Bay Shore Power Plant. But most of the dirty, fossil fuel-related installations that used to take up a lot of the Ohio lakefront shut down in the 2010s, ‘20s and ‘30s because regulations on carbon pollution and the national carbon fee made them uneconomical. Most of the sites have been remediated and have spurred a lot of redevelopment. Now there are housing and businesses integrated into new parkland.

The Green Ribbon Coalition helped plan for the transition of these carbon-legacy sites. Back in 2018, the group convened a task force to identify the sites and think about new uses. It helped communities plan ahead so they were not caught unprepared when a large facility closed. One model was the coal-fired power plant that was closed in Cleveland in 2016. That site was split between high-rise condo towers and a public park (paid for by the developers). Portions of the old power plant building remain as sculptural forms and climbing walls. Such adaptive reuse of industrial structures has been popular in Europe for many years.

Once I reach the lake, I hit the Greenway Trail and Maumee Bay State Park, which has been greatly enlarged thanks to the state bond fund. Then there are almost 25 miles of state and federal wildlife refuges -- a nearly continuous (and very incredible) stretch of marshes, wetlands, and forests all the way to Sandusky Bay. A major missing piece was filled in when the Davis-Besse Nuclear Power Plant shut down -- another legacy of the old energy system. It took a long time to decommission the plant, and parts of the site are still off limits. But most of it now has reverted to swamp forest, with the trail following the shoreline.

I stop and get out my binoculars. This area is one of the best birding spots in the country. A whole tourism industry has evolved to serve the birders who now make Lake Erie a key item on their life bucket list. And the birding keeps getting better as the habitat improves. The bond fund has allowed the wildlife refuges to expand and restore wetland systems, turning swampland back into the Great Black Swamp that once covered much of Northwest Ohio. Now that the wetlands are larger and better buffered from impacts, they will be more sustainable and resilient as the climate changes.

In a few more miles (and after seeing several bald eagles), I reach Catawba Island. I hop on the ferry to Put-In-Bay. In a few minutes I have another Lake Erie experience -- the island experience. You really do feel different on an island, and it’s not just because of all the bars. There’s a sense of liberation when you leave the mainland. Now the Greenway Trail extends out to the islands via ferries. It’s all seen as a one, continuous attraction.

I go to the top of the Perry’s Victory and International Peace Memorial Monument and enjoy the panoramic views of the western Lake Erie Basin. The afternoon sun is at the right angle to make the water look perfectly clear. And it truly is clear and clean. Back in the 2010s, there was a serious problem with algal blooms in the lake. Manure and fertilizers would wash off the farm fields in the Maumee River watershed. The nutrients would feed the algae, and by the end of the summer there would be a bloom covering the lake with thick, green, toxic slime. Not good for tourism or drinking water supplies! In
response, there were a lot of half-hearted attempts to get farmers and animal feedlot operators to change practices voluntarily. But the real change happened when **Green Ribbon Coalition** joined with the Ohio Environmental Council, and Natural Resources Defense Council and filed a lawsuit which forced EPA to strengthen regulations on agricultural water pollution. Now you don’t have to worry about water quality when you visit Lake Erie.

After a great walleye dinner, I crash at a B&B. I saw an incredible amount in one day along the lake.

**Day 2**

In the morning I take the ferry back to the mainland. The trail hugs the shore through East Harbor State Park and curves around the Marblehead peninsula. Then it makes a beautiful crossing of Sandusky Bay. A bike-pedestrian facility has been cantilevered off the side of the SR 2 bridge. It goes over the water for 2.5 miles. You feel like you’re flying over the water with all the gulls.

Soon I arrive in Sandusky. I only had to go about 20 miles today, and I’m grateful because it got really hot. Climate change has made Ohio summers like Arkansas used to be in 2000. We’ve had many years of summer droughts with temperatures in the 100s. In 2037, an extended heat emergency killed hundreds of people and caused the corn crop to fail across the state. Today it’s not quite that bad, but I’m eager to check into a cool hotel and get a beer.

Sandusky used to be a place to drive through on the way to the popular Cedar Point amusement park. Now it’s become a jewel of a small, waterfront city. Along with other small cities, such as Lorain and Ashtabula, it’s an activity hub along the Lake Erie Greenway. There are dozens of hotels, B&Bs, hostels and restaurants serving all the people who stop along the trail.

It’s also a boating center, thanks to its proximity to the Lake Erie islands. While power boating has declined because of concerns about climate change and the increased cost of fossil fuels, sailing has grown tremendously. And it’s no longer just an elite sport for the wealthy. There are sailing schools all along the lakefront that teach kids to sail in small, inexpensive sailboats.

Along with all the opportunities for active recreation, Sandusky also has built a reputation for heritage tourism (heritage tourism and nature tourism have been the fastest growing segments of the tourism industry for decades). Before the Civil War, Sandusky was a major stop on the Underground Railroad, a port where escaped slaves boarded boats to Canada. Now, partnering with the Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Sandusky has re-created the locations where slaves once hid and showcases the boats they took to freedom. The story is well told. And this is another reason the Ohio lakefront attracts so many people: the cities and towns have really learned how to tell their stories.

**Day 3**

Today I go another 30 miles east to Lorain. I make stops at Sheldon Marsh State Nature Preserve and Old Woman Creek National Estuarine Research Center, the only research center on the Great Lakes for studying where a stream mixes with a larger body of water. As I’ve come to expect, the trail connects all these sites with a continuous, safe, and interesting experience close to the lake. The trail is either an off-road trail facility through public lakefront land or a nice bikeway that’s separated from traffic on the road along the shoreline.

After lunch in Vermilion, a quaint little marina town, I pedal into Lorain. It’s small a city with a history of steel and shipbuilding. While the steel mills are still there making parts for wind turbines, the city’s downtown is more oriented to the new Lake Erie recreation and tourism economy. The old shipyards by the mouth of the Black River are waterfront neighborhoods. Broadway Avenue, the main street which used to be lined with vacant storefronts, is now bustling with stores that cater to visitors and to all the people who have moved into the city to live a walkable waterfront lifestyle.

I’m glad I made hotel reservations in advance. The city seems to be totally booked up. I find out that people are arriving for a big Puerto Rican arts festival this weekend. The city does a lot to celebrate the Puerto Rican heritage of many of its residents.

I spend the afternoon exploring the Lorain County Metro
Parks trail that connects with the Lake Erie Greenway. I follow the Black River south to Elyria, another small city that has been rediscovered. I want to see the famous waterfalls next to the center of town. Just before the two branches of the river come together, they go over a pair of waterfalls in Cascade Park. This site is a highlight of the Fresh Coast Waterfall Tour, a self-guided tour of the many beautiful falls on the rivers and streams that flow into Lake Erie. The **Green Ribbon Coalition** and other groups have created a bunch of-themed tours -- birding, wetlands, forest types, bridges, historic sites, wineries, and so on. They’re all well packaged and interpreted. So you can keep coming back to the region and have different experiences.

From here, I could connect to the North Coast Inland Trail and head back west to Toledo following a converted rail line. A lot of people do that as big loop. But I want to follow the water, so I head back north to the lake.

I am struck by how easy it is to get around. There are seamless connections that invite you to explore. And it’s simple to navigate. Along with the Lake Erie Greenway app, there is a great system of wayfinding signage. You always know where you are and how far it is to your next destination.

And the signs have a consistent design across the state. The **Green Ribbon Coalition** coordinated a common design template for the whole Fresh Coast zone. You feel like you’re in a coherent space from Toledo to Conneaut. It’s like being in a National Park, with a coherent, high quality design that distinguishes it as a special place.

**Day 4**

Today I go 30 miles to Cleveland, the centerpiece of the Ohio Lake Erie Greenway. Years ago, there was not much to recommend this stretch of the Ohio shoreline. It was mostly a suburban expanse of private, imposing, waterfront homes. There was very little public access to the water. But, thanks again to the state acquisition fund, many homes were purchased and turned into public greenspace. This was done strategically over decades, so large blocks of land were assembled. Now, everyone in these communities can feel like they have a lakefront home.

Another positive result of the creation of a green and open lakefront is that it has allowed the removal of much of the stone and concrete revetments that homeowners had installed to prevent shoreline erosion. The haphazard, lot-by-lot, armoring caused lots of problems, as protection in one place deflected wave action to adjacent properties and caused more erosion there. It also disturbed the natural transport of sand and sediment along the shore and degraded coastal habitat.

Now there are more places where development has retreated from the shore and natural coastal processes are allowed to occur. In places, this has allowed beaches to be replenished naturally. And it has improved the ecological quality of the coastal zone. This has been increasingly important because climate change has caused warmer winters, which means less ice cover on the lake. That means winter storms cause more wave action and erosion. Ultimately, the most cost-effective and sustainable solution has been simply to move out of harm’s way.

I reach the Cleveland lakefront parks west of downtown -- and, wow, this is a busy waterfront! It seems like half the city is out enjoying the water. It’s a city of active living, in part because of all the direct connections that draw people from the neighborhoods to the lake. There are still obstacles, such as roads and railroad tracks, but they have been overcome in many ways with all sorts of bridges, overpasses, tunnels, street extensions, and crosswalks.

Indeed, through decades of purposeful design and redevelopment, the city has completely reoriented itself to water. It started in the early years of the century when economic decline had hollowed out the city. People began to imagine a different urban landscape -- one that was greener, healthier, and ecologically restorative. Hundreds of acres of vacant land were assembled in green corridors, many following old streams that had been buried as storm sewers. The corridors extended around neighborhood centers where higher density development was promoted. Thus, as the city regained population, it brought nature into urban life. Now most
city residents are within walking distance of a green corridor (and also a bikeway and a transit stop). The corridors then connect people to the lake -- and also out to the wonderful system of Metroparks around the city.

I go past the crowded beach at Edgewater Park, past a marina full of sailboats, and follow the trail to Whiskey Island, a little oasis at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River. I rest and have a beer at the friendly waterfront saloon. Nearby are places to rent kayaks and paddle boards. I’m told that rowing is a big deal in Cleveland and surrounding communities. There is a popular “Kayaks for Kids” program to get children out on the water. And all the high schools have rowing teams based at the world-class rowing facilities on the Cuyahoga River.

At the far end of Whisky Island is my goal for the day. I find the causeway that goes across the water to the Old Coast Guard Station, a historic art deco gem sitting out in the harbor. It’s a weekday, but there are lots of people out here. They have collected here because it has one of the best views along the trail. You can climb to the top of the restored lookout tower and get a dramatic view of the lake, the downtown skyline, and all the boats moving up and down the river. If I look closely, I can just make out the offshore wind farm about seven miles out in the lake. There are several hundred wind turbines out there now, generating as much power as a nuclear power plant. It was the first freshwater wind farm in the country, and it’s why Northeast Ohio has become a leading center of wind turbine engineering, manufacturing, and maintenance.

On the way back across the causeway, I pass the railroad lift bridge that carries the Lake Erie Greenway Trail over the Cuyahoga River. For many years this crossing was the last gap in the trail. But public support kept growing for uninterrupted access. In 2035 funding was finally found to construct a rail bypass to take most freight trains off the lakefront line. When the old railroad bridge had to be refurbished in 2040, the reduced train traffic made it safe enough to allow a protected bike-pedestrian facility to be added to its side. At the big ribbon-cutting event, civic leaders inserted a golden bolt to mark the completion of continuous trail across the state of Ohio.

Day 5

Around the turn of the century environmental activists started calling for Cleveland to become “a green city on a blue lake.” It was time, they said, for the city to finish cleaning up the toxic legacies of the industrial revolution and start rebuilding the city with new design principles -- a city that would be sustainable in an age of climate change. This idea really took hold. In recent decades, Cleveland has always been near the top of national rankings of green and sustainable cities. And the city’s urban waterfront is a prime example of how sustainability design principles have been applied.

As I’m exploring this morning, I’m seeing a vibrant place where thousands of people can live a walkable urban lifestyle. I go across the river to the East Bank and follow the trail around the Port (nice observation tower to watch the ships!) and over to the North Coast Harbor area. Throughout this area there’s a dense mix of housing, offices, and local stores and restaurants. People can live and work and play here without a car. And the small, energy-efficient housing units allow people to reduce their energy consumption even further. The buildings are all built to the latest green building standards. Parking is minimized. Stormwater is managed on site through a system of green roofs, rain gardens, and wetlands. Hundreds of trees have been planted.
Of course, all the developments have been required to include public access to the water’s edge. There’s a continuous boardwalk promenade open to all. It’s the kind of place where people enjoy strolling in the evenings like in European cities.

At North Coast Harbor, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Great Lakes Science Center still attract good crowds. But no new tourist attractions have been built. The emphasis has been on creating attractive, 24/7, waterfront places for the people of Cleveland. That’s what is attracting visitors today – lively places on the water that people use every day and are well programmed with activities.

I see people meeting in coffee shops and going shopping. Office workers come and go. Kids run to the neighborhood school. There’s a yoga class happening in Voinovich Park behind the Rock Hall. Nearby are sand volleyball courts and a grass area for a kickball league. In the winter, the grass is flooded to make an ice rink for hockey games. There’s a real effort to keep the waterfront active year-round.

The orientation to the water continues up the lakeshore bluff to Cleveland’s downtown. Railroad tracks and a highway had long separated downtown from the lakefront. But once the noisy freight trains with hazardous cargo were rerouted it was easier to build over the tracks. Now there are developments that double as caps over the gap – broad bridges that allow downtown to flow down to the water.

There also has been a lot of development activity on the bluff just east of downtown. In the ’20s, citizens led by the Green Ribbon Coalition persuaded the city to rezone the land on top of the bluff for uses, such as apartment buildings, that could make the best use of the views. Now there’s a line of tall, slender, architectural showpieces.

The biggest opportunity to increase access to the water came with the closing of Burke Lakefront Airport. For decades, many Clevelanders advocated turning the airport into a park. It seemed a shame that almost 2 miles of shoreline were off limits because of small airport with dubious impact on the economic development of the city. That sentiment grew as environmentally-friendly, high-speed rail service in the Midwest took business from regional air travel. After the city’s financial obligations to the FAA expired in 2035, the city eagerly shut the airport and held a design competition to determine future uses for the 400-acre site.

Developers floated all kinds of grandiose ideas. After all, this was one of the biggest development opportunities in the country. But citizens, led by the Green Ribbon Coalition, insisted on a few basic principles: open, accessible, green, and related to the water. They also argued that, if housing were allowed, it should include a range of sizes and price points to allow a mix of income levels.

The winning proposal reserved three-quarters of the site for open space, including a great lawn for activities and a forest at the far end. The Greenway Trail was routed around the perimeter at the water’s edge. But there was still room to develop a substantial urban village of some 2,000 housing units.

It’s called Harbor Town, and it’s a very different kind of place. As I walk in I feel like I’m entering a modern version of a medieval waterfront district. The buildings are 2 to 4 stories tall and are jumbled together along narrow streets. Each building looks unique because dozens of different developers worked on the town, not just one mega-developer with a single concept. So the place seems to have grown organically over time. Instead of traditional zoning, the city created a form-based code for the district. This regulates the placement and size of buildings rather than their uses. The buildings are designed to adapt to different uses over time as needs change. So they could be housing, live-work spaces, tech start-ups, or offices. The ground floor spaces are often commercial uses that enliven the streets. With all the alleys and passageways between the buildings the place can feel like a maze. But the three main streets are set at right angles to the lake, so there are sightlines to the water to keep you oriented. And there is an intimate square in the center of the town to which all paths seem to lead.

No cars are allowed in the town, and most of the residents seem to have gladly adopted a car-free lifestyle. Why endure the costs of a car unless you absolutely have to have one? The absence of cars creates a pedestrian
environment that is quiet and safe. Indeed, a lot parents seem to come here just to let their kids run around. The main streets are just wide enough for small emergency vehicles. This caused the city to rethink the size of its vehicles. Previously, streets were widened to accommodate the largest fire truck or garbage truck, no matter how much that degraded the quality of a place. Now the vehicles are sized to fit the everyday needs of the place.

Harbor Town has become one of the most popular and vibrant districts of the city. People flock to it the way they flock to the old quarters of Barcelona or Istanbul. I hang out here the rest of the day. Then I meet some friends for dinner at an Italian bistro on the water. Perfect.

Day 6

Today will be a longer day on the bike. I’m heading south along the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail, which goes about 40 miles to Akron and then to points beyond. The Towpath rivals the Lake Erie Greenway in popularity. Many of the people staying at the hostel have come to Cleveland to ride it. There’s a well-developed tourist infrastructure, with hotels and inns along the trail offering special Towpath package deals with services such as bike rentals, shuttle rides, and luggage transport.

The Towpath starts at Canal Basin Park. This is Cleveland’s “ground zero.” It’s where the city started and where the 19th century canal met the river in the heart of the Flats. Here the river valley and a multitude of bridges frame one of the most visually exciting urban spaces in the country. The park does a great job interpreting the history of the place -- the canal era, the rise of the industrial city, and the restoration of the Cuyahoga. I love the way that a giant Hulett iron ore unloader has been installed along the riverbank. It really gives you a sense of the scale and power of steelmaking.

The trail takes me upriver where industry still dominates the Flats. I get fascinating views of oil storage tanks, rail yards, piles of stone and aggregate, and the vast and still-working steel mills.

But there’s also an interesting story about ecological restoration. Sections of the riverbank have been transformed with native plants. Wildlife is returning. Ravines where tributary streams once ran have been turned into greenways leading up to the surrounding neighborhoods. There’s a sense that you are in the midst of an interconnected natural system with water flowing through it all.

Farther south, nature takes over completely as I enter the Canal Reservation of Cleveland Metroparks and then cross into the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. The Cuyahoga changes from a bulkheaded shipping channel into a beautiful, free-flowing river. I pass through a pastoral countryside -- a mix of forests, wetlands, historic farmsteads, canal locks like ancient ruins, and picturesque canal towns. I take my time, stop along the way, and let myself be transported back in time. I think it’s amazing that there’s a national park between Cleveland and Akron. It’s really being discovered now that all the trail connections have been completed. (Which leads me to make this recommendation: Don’t ride the Towpath on weekends or holidays -- it gets too crowded!)

I reach Akron by late afternoon. The city has really embraced the Towpath. It runs right through the center of downtown and is a major part of the city’s identity. I stay to check out a free music show at Lock 3. Then I hop on the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad and ride back to Cleveland -- again marveling at the diversity of landscapes from city to natural river valley to industry.

Day 7

On my last day of the trip I get up early and follow the lakefront trail a few miles farther east, crossing the river, going past Harbor Town, and arriving at the Cleveland Lakefront Nature Preserve. This used to be a containment facility for dredgings from the Cleveland Harbor. Now it’s an 88-acre preserve for wildlife. It’s been wonderfully restored with native plants and trees. And it’s one of the highlights of the Lake Erie Birding Trail. So many people come here for the spring bird migration that it’s hard to get a hotel reservation in Cleveland.

I spend a couple of hours looking at warblers, flycatchers, sparrows, and gulls. When you’re out here you’re far enough from the city to feel like you’re out in the wilderness. It’s a nice to have such a contrasting experience -- and it’s all part of the seamless experience of the trail system and public open space along the lakefront.
The area around the nature preserve used to be cut off from the city by I-90, which still runs along a portion of the lakefront. On the other side of the highway was the obsolete coal-fired power plant I mentioned on the first day my trip. It shut down in 2016 and provided an opportunity to rethink the whole area. With the plant out of the way, it made sense to move the highway away from the lake and create a larger, unified area of parkland. It took a few years to build political support for the project. But citizens finally prevailed, arguing that the state and federal governments had a duty to repair the damage that 1960s transportation infrastructure inflicted on the city -- especially when the infrastructure blocked access to the lake, the most important natural resource.

This is as far east as I’ll go on this trip. Maybe next year, I’ll do the Cleveland-to-Conneaut half of the Ohio Lake Erie Greenway. There are a lot of things I’d like to see -- the best Lake Erie marsh (Mentor Marsh), the best beach (Mentor Headlands), the best river valley (Grand River), and the best restored downtown (Ashtabula). There are long stretches of scenic, wooded bluffs. And don’t forget the wineries!

I go back downtown and catch my ride back to Toledo. I take the train, but there are many other shuttle services are available. I also could have taken one of the ferries or cruise ships that connect all the cities along the Lake Erie shore.

It’s been a great week along the Fresh Coast. I’m grateful to those who thought ahead and envisioned a continuous, free, and open Lake Erie waterfront.

Cover photo of Lake Erie by Ian Adams. Other photos by David Beach.
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