

'The invention of Waterloo' no accident, writer says

By Greg Mercer, Record staff

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WATERLOO — As the last great industrial boom faded, Waterloo Region could have become another hollowed-out, Rust Belt-type town. But it didn't.

Instead, thanks to entrepreneurship, good planning, an upstart university and a growing focus on its downtowns, the region became a model for building cities. So argues Toronto writer Don Gillmor, whose expansive story *The Invention of Waterloo* is in the Jan-Feb. edition of *The Walrus* magazine.

Gillmor's profile on Waterloo and its evolution from farming community to Canada's answer to Silicon Valley is something the magazine has wanted to do for a while, he said in an interview Tuesday.

In particular, he wanted to examine how the University of Waterloo, with its early focus on engineering, math, science and computers, set the stage for the region's technology boom long before BlackBerry was a household name.

"I think in many cases for people outside the region, Waterloo is associated almost exclusively with RIM," he said. "But we thought it would be interesting to look past the world of RIM."

He found there's far more happening in the region, although the impact of RIM can't be ignored. Beyond the obvious 7,000-plus jobs the company has brought, there's the philanthropy that created the Perimeter Institute and Institute for Quantum Computing.

If that elusive quantum computer can be developed here, it would mean RIM's legacy would far outlast any ups and downs in the smartphone industry, Gillmor said.

"The region would be in a perfect position to capitalize on what would be another revolution. Whether it works out or not, it's an interesting gamble," he said. "There's so much that has happened there that is a result of RIM, but it's not dependent upon RIM."

Through repeated boom and bust cycles that have taken the region from buttons to rubber to BlackBerrys, the decline of industries has always left behind building blocks for the next evolution, Gillmor said.

Good planning has also created institutions that don't fluctuate with the economy, and wisely spread university students throughout the region's long downtown corridor, including Cambridge and Kitchener.

"That was a very smart idea. It uses energy that brings life back to those cores," he said. "These things will withstand any short-term downturn in the economy."

To read Gillmor's story, visit walrusmagazine.com

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