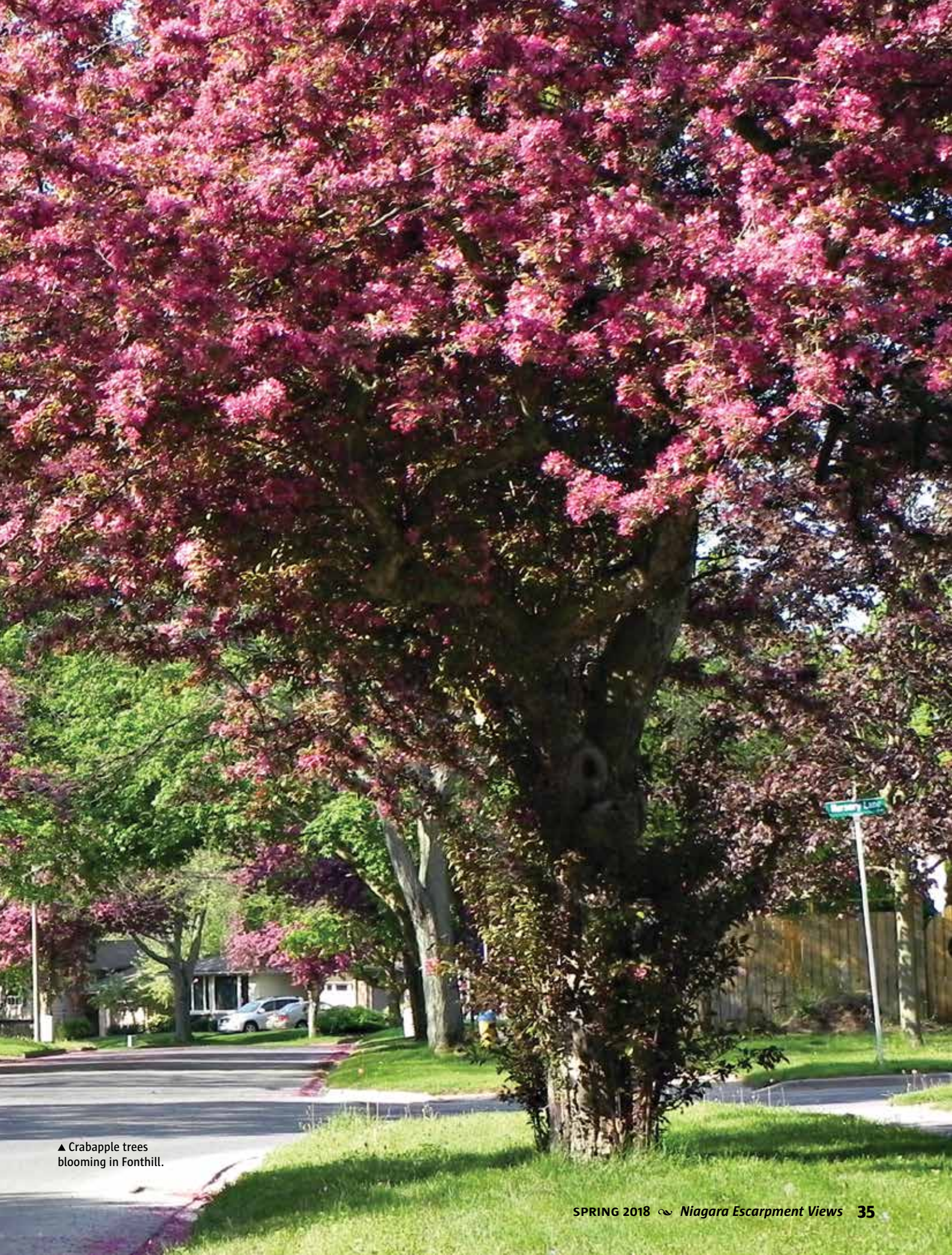




Cycle Tour Through Pelham

WORDS & PHOTOS BY HELEN POWERS

Niagara Region has an abundance of interesting places to see and increasingly, visitors are exploring the area on two wheels rather than four. With the growing popularity of cycling tourism, a local organization has established a network of ways to reach your destination. Their route through the Town of Pelham has much to offer and because it sits on top of the Niagara Escarpment, there is no need to pedal up that significant slope!



▲ Crabapple trees blooming in Fonthill.

▼ Cycling makes it easier to stop and enjoy views like this one from Lookout Point. Toronto and Niagara Falls can be seen on clear days.



On a dreary January day, I was inspired by the beautiful landscapes on the Niagara Cycling Tourism Centre’s website to ride the 34-km Pelham route in the spring. Unfortunately, a series of events shelved my cycling adventure. I did manage to drive the route when the orchards were in bloom and all that beauty made me determined to pedal through Pelham later in the year.

To help plan a cycling visit,

the Centre’s website provides helpful information on bike rentals, shuttle services, repair companies, and accommodations that cater to cyclists. Venture Niagara, an organization that supports economic development activity, is behind this extensive online resource.

“People have a strong desire to come to Niagara for cycling because the area is so flat,” says Susan Morin, business development manager with Venture Niagara. “It is a great

opportunity for first-time cyclist holidays and an entry point for people who are new to this type of vacation. Often tourists will plan a three or four-day ride for their holiday.”

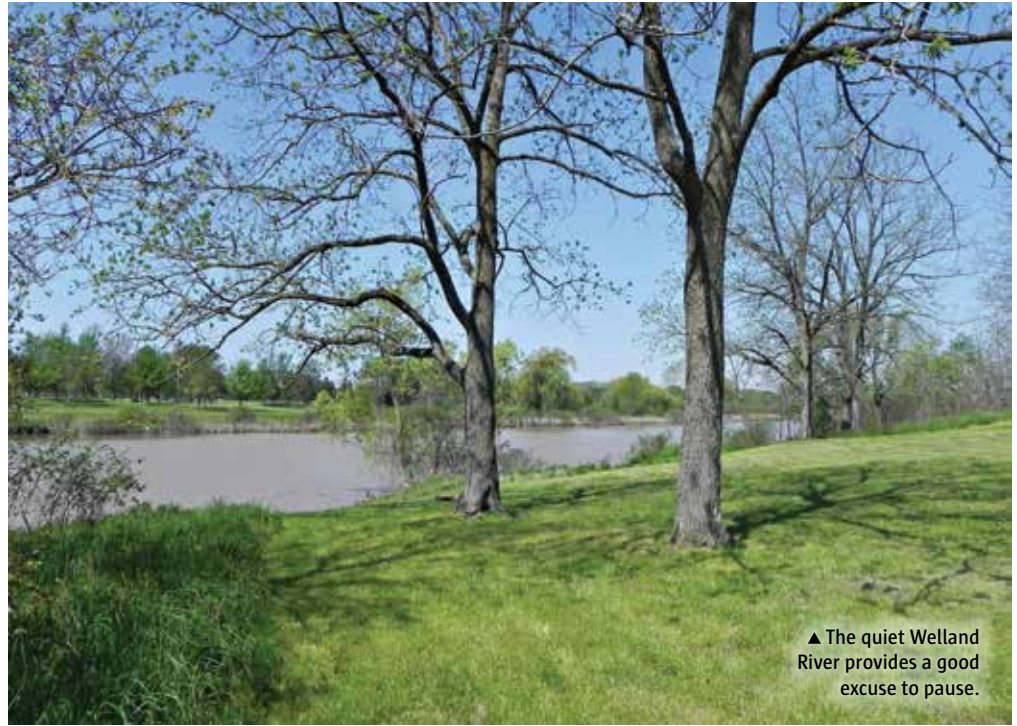
Many business owners are eager to join the bike-friendly business network, a program that Morin helps to implement. It began as a pilot project in 2014 with four municipalities that were designated as “bike friendly” by the Share the Road Cycling Coalition. There are now 64 active business

members in the region who display a window decal that certifies a minimum provision of drinking water, a device-charging station, washrooms, and bike parking.

“More local businesses are getting on board with cycling tourism,” says Morin, “and there is a growing interest in qualifying for the certification.”

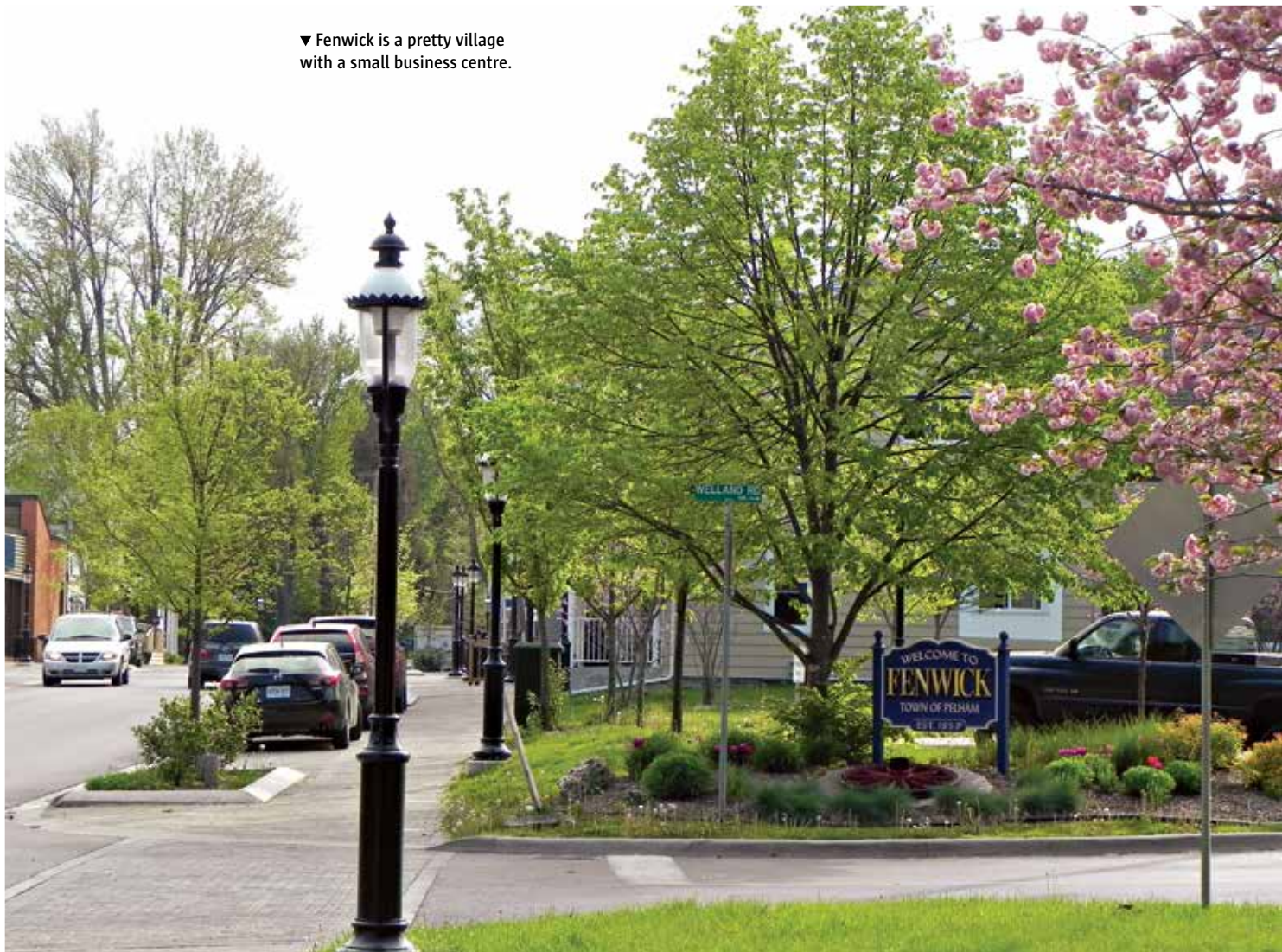
Five Villages

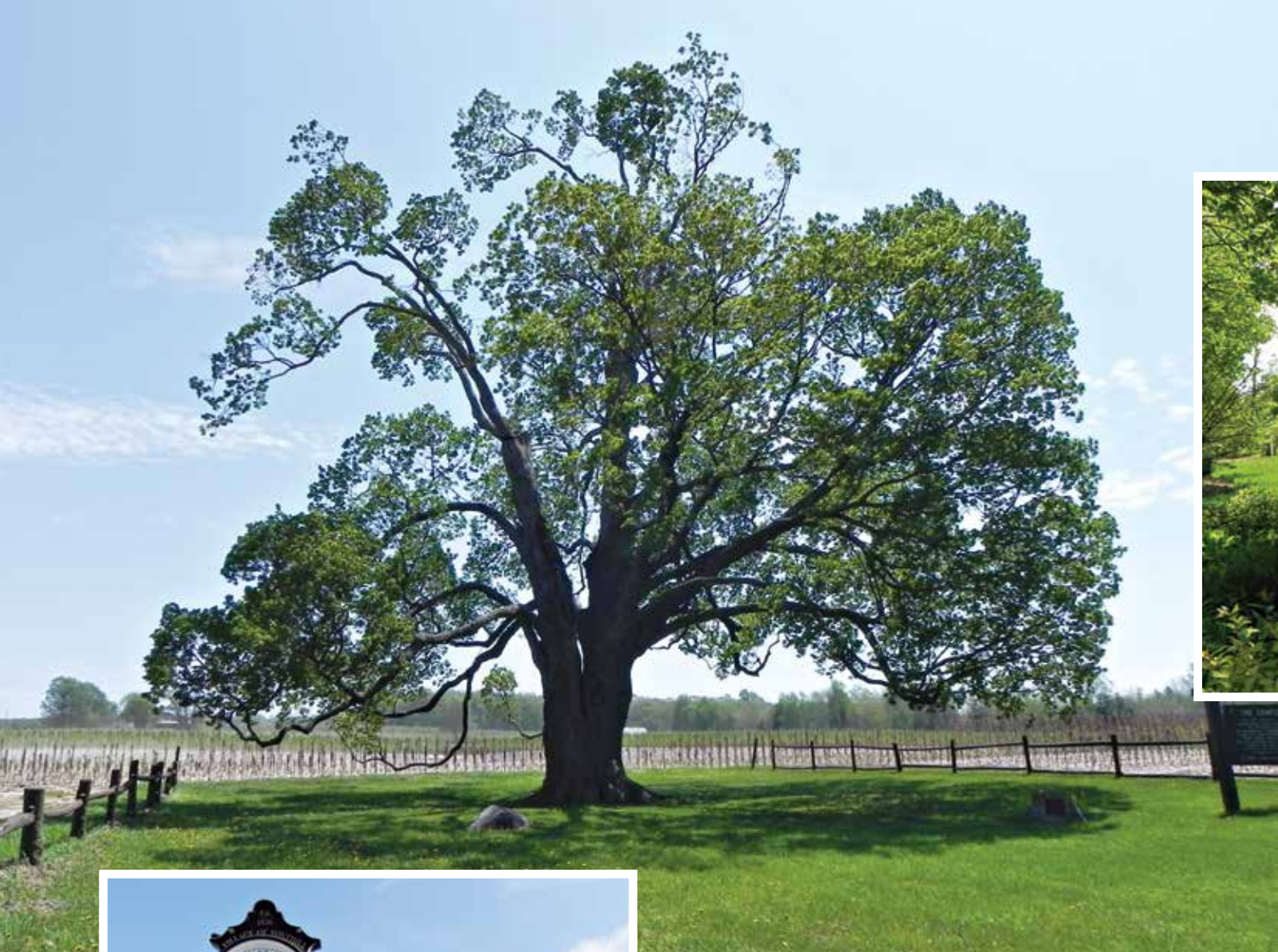
Located between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie, the Town of Pelham is made up of five



▲ The quiet Welland River provides a good excuse to pause.

▼ Fenwick is a pretty village with a small business centre.





◀ The shops of Fonthill, the largest village in Pelham, draw more vehicle traffic.

▲ This famous Sugar Maple is more than 500 years old and was named after the Comfort family.

historic settlements: Fonthill, Fenwick, North Pelham, Effingham, and Ridgeville. Given that the route is a complete loop, cyclists can begin wherever they like, however the Centre mentions that Harold Black Park in the south end of Fonthill is a good spot to begin.

If you choose to cycle the loop clockwise and head south, flat rural roads lead away from Fonthill down to the Welland River. Historically this was a busy commercial waterway but now it is rather quiet

with recreational boating. A heritage monument across from O'Reilly's bridge explains the succession of bridges built here since the original wooden construction in the 1840s. Cycling further west along River Road, there are parks and trails that offer good picnic stops and resting places.

The route then turns north through many farming properties to the pretty village of Fenwick which has a small centre of businesses, lovely older homes, and graceful trees framing the streets.



▲ In addition to the Comfort Maple, North Pelham is known for one of the oldest churches in the area, First Presbyterian Church.

► Cyclists welcome here.



Continuing north and then east brings cyclists to North Pelham and a natural feature that pre-dates Canada itself. The Comfort Maple is estimated to be over 500 years old and is thought to be the country's oldest Sugar Maple. Huge branches reach over a small plot of land managed by the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) who monitors its health very closely. The land was given to NPCA by the Comfort family who acquired the land

in 1816 from Laura Secord's family. Although beautiful, this is not a good starting point for the cycle route due to a small parking area and a rather narrow driveway.

A short ride east brings you to one of the oldest churches in the area. The First Presbyterian Church of North Pelham was established in 1828 and their first pastor was paid in bushels of wheat for a year of employment. Across the street, a large and lovely orchard borders the church cemetery, whose families

are commemorated in the names of several local roads.

Although the Pelham route is mostly flat, the next section on Tice Road is an exception. The map has warnings of several short and steep hills with narrow sight lines over a distance of a few km. On the plus side, there is an abundance of blooming lilacs along the roadside so, as you carefully trudge up hills, the aroma of flowers will be lovely.

At the east end of Tice Road is the highest point of

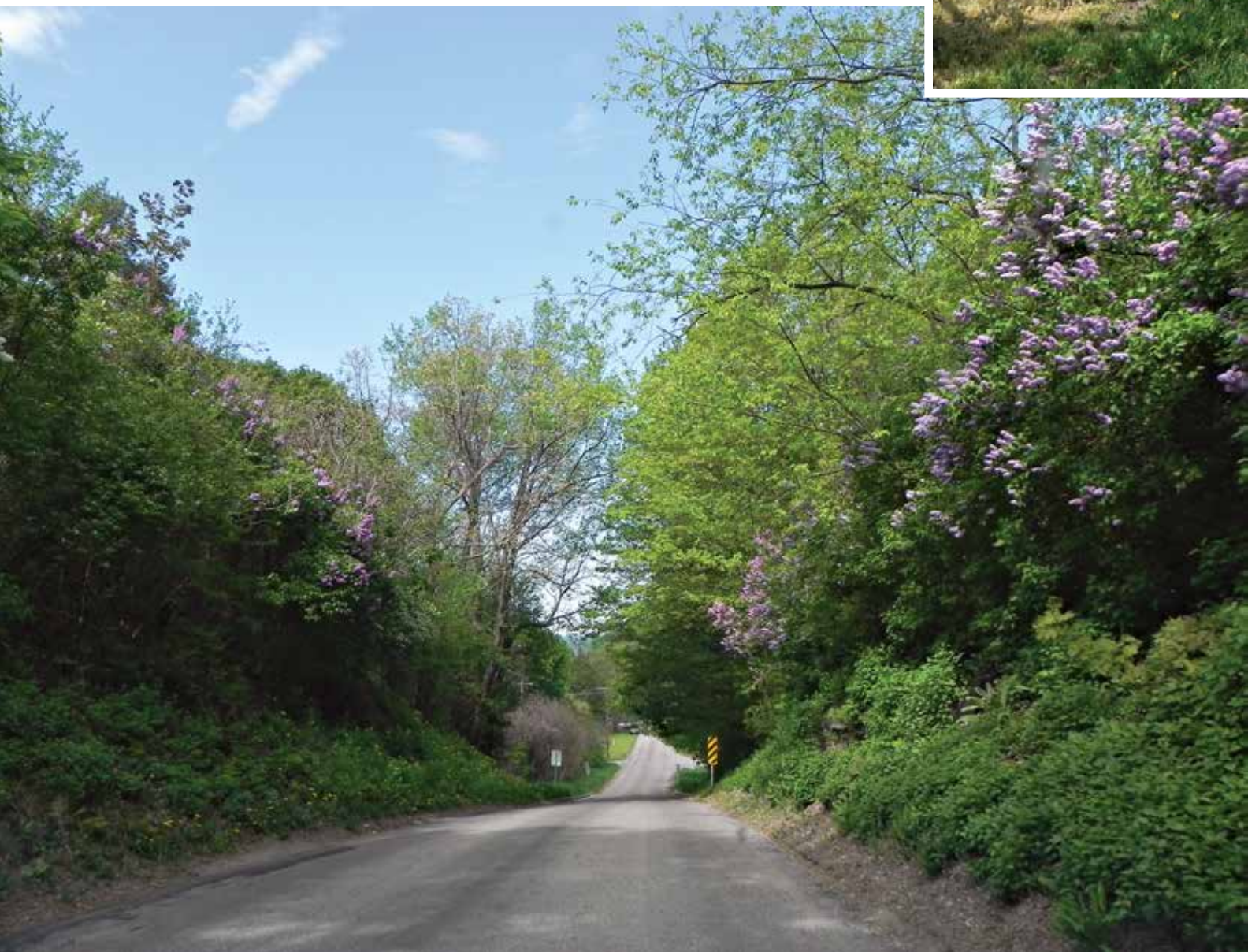
land in the region, located at Lookout Point Country Club. With an elevation of 252 m, on a clear day you can see the skyline of Toronto to the north and Niagara Falls to the east.

The route then returns to Fonthill, the largest town in Pelham and the busiest in terms of road traffic. Cyclists are led through new and old neighbourhoods on the way to the town centre which features many shops. Next, a quiet section of parkland trail leads to a subdivision of

gentle hills and colourful crab apple blooms that create a lush canopy overhead and drifts of flowers along the road. Soon after, the loop is complete at nearby Harold Black Park.

Break Up The Route

As an average cyclist who is neither terribly fast or slow, my drive of the route left me confident I could handle the terrain. My bicycle is a hybrid of road and mountain bikes, light in weight with ample gears to handle slopes.





▲ With cool weather and orchards in bloom, spring is a great season to cycle.

◀ The fragrance of lilacs rewards your pedalling through North Pelham.

However I decided that doing 34 km in one day would be too much for me. When I return to visit Pelham on two wheels, I will break the route into two parts; perhaps one loop along the north half to visit the village centres, and one loop along the less habited south half.

I am positive I will not be cycling the Greater Niagara Circle route which runs east of Pelham. At over 140 km long, this is definitely out of my league. To help more ambitious cyclists with that large distance, a very popular ferry service called Bridge-it has been running from May to October across the Welland Canal and it saves a great deal of time.

Three years ago, Susan Morin helped a cycling tour company, Vélo Québec, with their “Grand Tour Desjardins”, a six-day ride with over 1,700 cyclists. During their trip, she chatted with the visitors and

received overwhelmingly positive feedback about cycling in Niagara.

“So many people spoke about coming back again, some with more members of their families, because they enjoyed it so much,” she says.

The Niagara Cycling Tourism Centre outlines many routes with a diversity of distances, terrain and features to choose from. Because cycling uses up calories, this is an excellent excuse to indulge in delicious meals and treats along the way. When cycling you see things up close, feel less like a tourist, and appreciate the local history, culture, and beauty.

Helen Powers is a writer from Hamilton who spends a lot of time outdoors and enjoys exploring new places. Her last story for Niagara Escarpment Views was “City of Waterfalls,” Autumn 2015. NEV