

Improvements at Belfountain Conservation Area could draw crowds

By Bill Rea

A lot of ideas are being considered for what's known as the Belfountain Complex, but what's really wanted is input from the public. Several members of the public were gathered recently at Caledon Ski Club to hear what's in the works so far, and to offer commented.

The pressures of cars passing through the hamlet and trying to find places to park is still a major concern.

The current process involves a class environmental assessment (EA) for the dam at Belfountain Conservation Area and the head pond that's upstream, as well as initial concept management plans for the Conservation Area itself.

Deborah Martin-Downs, CAO of Credit Valley Conservation (CVC) stressed the importance of public input in this process.

"We are earnestly seeking your opinions," she told the people at the meeting, adding there will still be lots of chances to offer them, as the EA is just getting started. She also explained the current management plan for the sites dates to 1984, so there are current issues it can't address.

Ron Scheckenberger, principal consultant with Amec Foster Wheeler, told the meeting a review of the condition of the dam revealed deficiencies, so the studies are looking at options on what can be done, with a number of factors that need to be considered. As well, he pointed out there are other features within the Conservation Area that could be impacted by what's done with the dam.

Scheckenberger pointed out there is a process to be followed with EAs, and there are specific conditions when applied to a conservation area. He said they have to be aware of such things as flooding and erosion.

Scheckenberger said the study has seven objectives, including maintaining a fisheries barrier between upstream brook trout and downstream invasive and non-native species; reducing or minimizing the risk to visitors, staff and affected properties; maintaining or improving the visitor experience; conserving and enhancing cultural heritage attributes; promoting natural stream function; striving for long-term sustainability, including economic viability; and conserving and enhancing natural heritage attributes.

Aaron Brouwers, senior engineer with Amec Foster Wheeler, said baseline data was obtained in a number of area, including hydrology and hydraulics, structural engineering, geotechnical engineering, stream morphology and sediment, aquatic ecology, terrestrial ecology, cultural and built heritage, archaeology and financial.

He also said there are long lists of alternatives.

In terms of the dam, they include doing nothing, repairing it, replacing it, modifying it, decommissioning it or taking it offline.

The list of alternatives for the head pond include doing nothing, rehabilitating it, expanding the tableland, converting it to a wetland, creating a natural channel that depends of the demand created by an offline pond and wetland.

There are other options coming out of this that are being considered, including creating a fish ladder, trail or boardwalk improvement, setting up a water wheel, sediment removal, etc.

Laura Rundle, conservation lands planner with CVC, outlined the guiding statements behind the project.

The vision statement calls for the protection and enhancement of "the unique fusion of natural and cultural heritage and to celebrate the complex as an iconic destination for traditional park experiences on the Niagara Escarpment."

The goal is "to protect and enhance the significant natural and cultural heritage features and functions of the Belfountain Complex, while providing for high quality, environmentally sustainable appreciation and recreation opportunities."

She also said six objectives have been identified, and they are aimed at protecting and enhancing the ecological diversity and natural heritage features and function; conserving the cultural heritage of the area; promoting the identity of the Belfountain Complex; developing solutions for sustainable conservation area operations; providing sustainable recreation opportunities; and allowing for site accessibility.

"It is truly a unique property," was the way Colin Berman, an associate with BrookMcIlroy, described the Belfountain Complex.

He added they have looked at different areas of the complex to try and reach the objectives.

Addressing the forecourt, Berman called it "your initial introduction to the site."

"It's a bit anticlimactic," he commented, adding there's no real introduction to what's there.

Opportunities to improve that, he said, include sprucing up the entrance so people will have a sense that they're arriving at something. There's also a need for better accessibility to pick up and prop off people. Berman also said they are looking at gathering locations like picnic areas.

Calvin Brook, a principal with BrookMcIlroy, spoke about visitors' centre and parking issues. The current parking area is on a hill, and the visitors' centre could be seen as a trail head, as well as place for information, washrooms, etc. He observed the services there now are limited.

Brook said there is a desire to have the visitor experience welcoming, safe and accessible, adding they're looking at the centre as a gateway.

There are currently 53 spots in the parking area, and Brook said they are looking to increase that. There are three scenarios being looked at, which would see the lot increased by four, nine or 28 spots. He stressed if the parking area is going to expand, it has to be environmentally sustainable.

CVC has operations that go on in the current building, so efforts are in place to make sure they still have that space, possibly through a consolidated facility.

Berman said they have also been looking at the hillside garden.

A number of people at the meeting were concerned about bringing more people to the area. One man suggested the expansion is being pursued as a way to generate revenue for CVC.

Eric Baldin, manager of land planning with CVC, said that's not been the focus of the process.

One woman had a number of concerns with more people visiting the Belfountain area, including bus traffic, noise, litter, people parking outside the Conservation Area, vandalism, etc.

Brook said they are looking at a number of options. He added some people have indicated they want the parking area expanded, although he also said they should test the scenario of keeping the current parking arrangements and improving the landscaping of the site.

One man wondered how many current visitors use the Conservation Area now, and also asked what would happen if they add more parking.

‘If we build it and make it so nice, they will come,’ he predicted, adding attracting more people might not help the hamlet.

One woman commented that a lot of what she had been hearing sounded great. The difficulty, she added, comes with the number of people who would come. Baldin said they would want to encourage people to use the facility, but added they're not trying to increase the numbers. The main aim is to improve the experience for the visitors. The woman wondered if they could set a maximum limit on the number of people visiting the area in a day.

‘We love what you're doing,’ she said. ‘We just don't want more people coming.’

A public information centre on the issue is planned for November.