

Many ideas on what to do with Badlands

By Bill Rea

There are lots of ideas, but not as much agreement, when it comes to what people want to see in the future for the Cheltenham Badlands.

There are calls to restrict access, as well as an appreciation that the Badlands attract tourist traffic.

The Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT), which owns the property, is working on a management plan for the site, and about 40 people were out in Inglewood last Wednesday evening to offer input.

Today, the Badlands is recognized as a provincially significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI).

The 36.6-hectare property was acquired in 2002 by OHT, and is managed by the Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC).

Safety in and around the site has been a concern for a couple of years. It attracted many visitors, and Olde Base Line was not deemed a safe place for parking. Peel Region banned parking and stopping in the area of the property last year. A fence was erected along Old Base Line last year to keep people off the Badlands.

The Region announced plans a couple of years ago to put in a parking lot at the northeast corner of the property, and it sparked considerable controversy. It was approved by the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), but that ruling was appealed. A hearing was recently held, and the decision of that body is pending.

Kendrick Doll, natural heritage coordinator with OHT, told last week's meeting the proposed parking lot is not seen as the ultimate solution. They are still examining other options, seeking a more holistic plan. He also said it was clear that they needed to close the site to foot traffic, although there are still hopes to open the area once the plan is complete.

Kathy Hering, manager of acquisition and conservation services with OHT, said there are a number of guiding questions in the development of the master plan for the site. They include having a process that allows for the best decisions to be made. Safety and parking are natural concerns, as she said they are looking for the optimal solution in terms of safety and accommodating visitors to the site. They also want to accommodate visitors while protecting the sensitive features and preserving it for future educational opportunities.

She added input will be important to the Badlands Management Team.

Another public meeting is scheduled for June 1. Hering said they plan to present the latest options for the site at that time.

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy pointed out it's helpful to remember the site is an ANSI, meaning there's little chance for development there. She warned people might have some well-meaning suggestions that wouldn't be permitted.

Doll responded that they want to hear as many ideas as possible.

"We don't want to prohibit any ideas from coming in because that's how you think outside the box," he declared.

He added the site has been an ANSI since before 1974.

OHT has been working with the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, and Doll said the Ministry will have to approve the master plan.

He also said there will still be opportunities for people to comment on what's going into the plan.

"We'll accept comments whenever people can provide them," he declared. "We have a blank slate and we want to hear your comments."

Doll also pointed out there has been considerable human impacts on the site. From the 1970s to 2009, he said there was a three-metre drop in the level of the Badlands. But he added humans aren't the only cause of this. They contribute about 10 per cent to the erosion, and the rest is occurring naturally. He added if that continues, the lands will likely return to a flat surface, with vegetation possibly coming back.

"We stopped that 10 per cent by building the fence," he said.

There were a number of questions about the possible timeline for the master plan, with some people wondering what the hurry is.

Doll repeated the proposed parking lot is seen as an initial step.

"People are coming," he observed, adding the 33 parking spots proposed in the lot should address between 80 and 95 per cent of demand most days. He agreed something would have to be done about heavier demand periods.

One man suggested closing the whole property, using it only for educational purposes and maybe having parking facilities for school buses. One man was concerned that putting in parking spots would encourage more traffic.

"It's a dangerous situation," he said. "Parking encourages more traffic."

There were also concerns expressed about clogging Olde Base Line with traffic, since it's a main artery for police and fire vehicles.

One woman pointed out there seemed to be a universal feeling that people did not want the parking lot, but she added the tourism

value of the Badlands is important. Local businesses depend on the traffic going through the area.

There were also suggestions that shuttle buses could transport tourists to and from various centres. One man suggested they could go in Cheltenham, and Inglewood, as well as other places. They could help the local business scene.

One man pointed out there could have been other possible places for the parking lot, like off Creditview Road. Doll pointed out they are looking at additional parking opportunities.

One man observed there had been a lot of good ideas discussed at the meeting.

?What's the rush on this thing?? he asked.