

No end in sight in battle over proposed water-skiing events

By Todd Taylor

In 2009, Caledon orthodontist Cliff Singer realized his dream of owning a rural property in Mono.

Singer and his wife Judy fell in love with the property that was home to a man-made lake, courtesy of an old worked-out gravel pit on Airport Road, about a kilometre north of Mono Mills.

Singer is a doting father and a devoted family man. Other than the tranquility that the property offers, the family's main motivation was to find a private waterway where their daughter Chantal could practise water skiing. But the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), the Town of Mono, and some concerned citizens are not in favour of the Singer family practising their craft in an area known for its peace and quiet.

The property owner's application to NEC to hold up to four water-skiing events annually on the 200-acre site was only partially successful, the regulator giving only approval for a three-year period. The result has been both an appeal by the Singers and a cross-appeal by the Town, which has hired a senior Toronto law firm to challenge the partial approval.

Singer describes himself as someone from an extremely humble background. In fact, he never had the opportunity to water-ski as a child.

"I first tried it in my early 30s and fell in love with it. I hope water-skiing will not be presented as an elitist sport. Particularly, when Caledon and Dufferin County actively support the equestrian community. Over 10 million Americans have water-skied. I think the average person is far more likely to afford a water-skiing ride than a thoroughbred horse which would allow them to participate in an equestrian event."

Singer, who is a level-3 judge for water-skiing events, has offered to give back to the Town of Mono youth "by introducing them to a sport they might not otherwise have an opportunity to try."

It is true that Singer has been referred to as a "pain in the ass" by some in his community. Discussions with him via phone are thoughtful and passionate, yet his persistent nature can be off-putting. Singer himself will admit that he has indeed upset a few people in the community with single-minded pursuit of his water-skiing dreams.

Although no one will overtly admit their personal biases against Singer, one could certainly connect the dots to see that in some instances this is indeed the case.

Singer has privately made accusations about close relationships on the NEC with town staff. He has also wondered aloud that "perhaps the plan is to make sure I can do nothing with my property and eventually (the Town of Mono) buy it themselves for 50 cents on the dollar. There is a term for this in the U.S., it is called a regulatory taking. You reduce the value of someone's land by regulatory restrictions and then the same regulatory entity down the road buys it at a reduced cost."

Mono Mayor Laura Ryan is not aligned to Singer's description of events. Although Ryan did agree to be interviewed for this article, she admitted it was difficult to make public comments as the Singer situation is currently in due process. It was extremely important to the Mayor that she not be seen negotiating via the press.

The Mayor shared that Mono council does indeed have an issue with the way NEC works. NEC is backwards. They approve things first and ask for input afterwards. Ryan admitted that the process is hard on the applicant and residents.

"The only way we could get them to re-look at the issue is to appeal it," she said.

Although the Town of Mono is not the decision-maker, it certainly can act as a commenting body. In the end, council was uncomfortable with what Singer was proposing. As such, council wanted more answers to some of their concerns. Ryan described council concerns as "the scope of what was being allowed. There could be events there on an annual basis. The volume of spaces for parking was originally supposed to be 40 spaces, then they came back with over 200 spots."

In addition, there were concerns about road occupancy and potential damage to the road base. (The parking issue relates to the space available on the huge site. Singer and a spokesman for the water-skiing association said the events proposed would not see more than 40 cars using the space.)

I did ask Ryan if there were personal biases towards Cliff Singer and his cause. The Mayor responded by stating simply, "There is no foundation to this."

She went on to explain that working in public life is a small network. One would work with many of these people over a career. Singer was trying his best to throw whatever he can out there. Council was not taking sides, she insisted, "we are simply trying to determine what is best for our land use. Will it disrupt the traffic flow or the environment? We have a responsibility to ensure this is not going to come back and be a problem. Council does not feel it is being unfair."

In a separate interview, Deputy Mayor Ken McGhee agreed with the Mayor's assessment. McGhee shared that the gravel company

had mined below the water table, and this could cause issues such as murky water. He explained that council believes this is a sensitive property. He also insisted that there is no personal bias against Singer.

McGhee's vision for his home area includes a high level of environmental consciousness, an area that has a night sky policy, does not allow industries that use excessive amounts of water, and any other activity that may have a long-term impact on the area.

Ryan wants to continue to operate the municipality in a way that the majority of residents feel they should be maintaining. That is to celebrate the areas ecological features and tremendous quiet. Although the Singer case could very well end with high legal fees for the residents of Mono, Ryan spoke for council by saying they feel this is in the best interest of all residents.

In the end, council could not get a clear vision of the intent of NEC. The Mayor was passionate when stating we must be cautious for our residents. We must be cautious about what the results to the area would be if events were to be held there.

In the end, the Mayor admitted that there were attempts to settle via mediation with Singer, but there were differing visions of what the outcome should look like. The sides could not agree, she said.

As for Singer, he has vowed to continue on in his quest for up to four water-skiing events on his property.

Singer is a driven man, one who will not give up his mission to give back to a sport that has given so much to his family.

He said the bureaucracy he has had to endure has been taxing on him personally and financially. Legal costs, assessment fees, and time away from work have cost the Singer family much as they pursue their dream.

Researching this story has uncovered a significant amount of information that is quite frankly daunting. Singer calls the entire process regulatory abuse and a waste of taxpayer resources. Hearings with NEC will occur mid-summer this year. Resolution to this ongoing affair seems to be in the distant future.