

Parking area planned for Cheltenham Badlands

By Bill Rea

People visiting the Cheltenham Badlands normally find parking can be something of a challenge.

That's about to change, as Peel Regional council last week approved the construction of a parking area just east of the site.

The Badlands are a deposit of Queenston Shale on the south side of Olde Base Line Road, between Chinguacousy and Creditview Roads. The soil and vegetation have been worn away at the site by erosion, and the result is a formation of red rock with deep gullies running through it.

There is also an idea to set up a viewing area for the site.

The staff report to Regional council last Thursday stated the site is owned by the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT) and is managed by Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC). The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) has designated it an area of natural and scientific interest (ANSI). Staff also pointed out it's become a popular tourist attraction.

Concerns have been expressed over the safety of people visiting the site. There is currently no designated parking area, meaning cars have to be parked at the side of the road where there are numerous steep hills. Sightlines in the area are a worry too.

The concerns were raised by a working group representing a number of agencies, including BTC, MNR, Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC), Credit Valley Conservation (CVC), Caledon Hills Bruce Trail Club, Caledon Countryside Alliance, the Town and the Caledon Environmental Advisory Committee.

The Region brought in a consulting firm to look into the concerns, and while there was no history of any significant traffic accidents around the site, there was the potential.

Staff said 10 possible solutions were looked at as part of the study, with the off-street parking lot being viewed as the preferred alternative.

OHT owns the land being eyed for the lot, and staff stated the Region would be allowed to build it there at no cost to the municipality. The plan is for BTC to be responsible for its maintenance.

The parking lot will consist of 33 parking spots, as well as room for two school buses. Staff added there was consideration given to making sure the design blends in with the natural surroundings and minimizing the impacts on the local environment.

The current plan is for construction to start in the spring of 2015, with the lot opening that fall.

Staff reported the cost of the project was originally projected at \$1.5 million. But based on the design work that has been done so far, the estimate has been reduced to \$1 million. They added they are seeking other funding partners through the federal and Provincial governments.

Sally Rook, project manager with the Region, told councillors there could be liability issues if the situation is not addressed.

Kendrick Doll, natural heritage coordinator of OHT, told councillors MNR put up the money in 2000 to buy the property as part of the Bruce Trail. He also pointed out the site is within the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

Work has been going on for about five years on a management strategy for the site, with traffic and safety being a priority.

But there has also been a priority set on dealing with visitors actually walking the site, as they are thought to be adding to the erosion. "You take some of the site with you," he said, referring to what happens when people leave.

He said a viewing platform would perform the same function as a boardwalk at a wetland, allowing people to see the site without actually walking into it, providing a "safe, educational and worth-while experience."

BTC Executive Director Beth Gilhespy told councillors the trail has been crossing the site since the late 1960s, adding it's maintained by volunteers from the Caledon Hills club.

She said they are aware of the degradation of the site.

"It's a challenging site for a trail because of the clay," she observed.

A viewing platform will add value to the experience of the site, as many people just want to see it and not hike it.

But Councillor Allan Thompson, who has the Badlands in his ward, said the platform is one of the items on the OHT's wishlist, and is only conceptual at this point.

"I think we all agree it's a wonderful feature," commented Mississauga Councillor Pat Saito, who was chairing the meeting in the absence of Chair Emil Kolb. "I'm glad the traffic's in Caledon."

"It's a great spot," Councillor Patti Foley remarked, but she agreed there are "thrill hills" for traffic going along Olde Base Line. Cars taking the hills might have very little time to see pedestrians. "The safety factor is a big concern."

Councillor Richard Paterak was appreciative for all the work that had gone into this.

"It's very complex when you have so many agencies," he observed.

?It's been a long journey to get here,? Thompson remarked.

As a farmer, Thompson was a little apologetic, pointing out it was bad farming practices that started the erosion in the first place. He also expressed the hope there will be signs on the road, advising motorists when the parking comes available, since the site's popularity is growing as a tourist attraction.

?It's now got to be a hive of people,? he said. ?We're worried somebody's going to be hurt.?

Thompson added there's still more to be done at the site.

?To me, this is a very good start,? he commented.