

Public offers input on the Badlands

By Bill Rea

There is lots of interest in preserving the Cheltenham Badlands, as well as constructive ideas on how to go about it.

That came through Tuesday night at the public meeting hosted by the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT) to gather input into ongoing efforts to develop a master plan for the site.

There was almost unanimous support for maintaining the fences around the site that went up earlier this year to keep people out. There were also calls for some amenities aimed at helping visitors view the property. Some people suggested off-site parking facilities, although they also suggested charging people to park. One man recommended closing down that stretch of Olde Base Line Road from dawn to dusk and charging \$20 per car, with a \$400 fine for people who park illegally. Shuttle buses could be used to get visitors to and from the site, with some of the revenue going to local charities.

Others pointed out Olde Base Line is an arterial road that is also used by emergency vehicles.

The striking landscape of the Badlands, located on the south side of Olde Base Line, east of Creditview Road, is one of Ontario's geological treasures and one of the best examples of badland topography in the province. The exposed bedrock at the Badlands is Queenston shale, and this iron-rich material was deposited more than 445 million years ago.

Due to removal of vegetation during land clearing and livestock grazing in the early 1900s, the shale has eroded into a series of hummocks and gullies, producing the distinctive landscape.

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). Sean Fraser of OHT said they and the Cheltenham Badlands Management Planning Team have been planning for the future of the property since 2008. While the master planning process is underway, the site has been temporarily closed to visitors to prevent further damage. Several people commented on the problems generated by the popularity of the attraction.

?How blessed are we that this is a problem for us?? one man remarked.

About 35 members of the public were on hand for Tuesday's session.

Although there were efforts to keep the discussion away from traffic and parking issues (the focus of the meeting was aimed more at internal matters involving the site), they did come up.

Peel Regional council last year approved spending \$1 million for a parking lot east of the site to accommodate 33 cars and two school buses. The Niagara Escarpment Commission approved the development permit for the project in May 2014, but an appeal of that decision has been filed.

Fraser said there are four guiding principles involved in the development of the master plan: Improved visitor safety, conserving the property's heritage values, increasing accessibility for visitors and enhancing site interpretation and public education.

Management issues involving the site that Fraser cited include traffic safety, erosion and impact from visitors, including vandalism, littering and unauthorized uses.

Caroline Marshall, of Dillon Consulting, said Tuesday's meeting was the first of two such sessions that are planned. The other is scheduled for January, and there might be third later in the process. She also warned the process might be put on hold early in 2016 while the appeal hearing into the parking area is dealt with.

An online public survey was started in September and is slated to continue until the end of this month. It's looking into such factors as uses the site has been put to, including length of stay, time of year, how people got there and what they did; concerns over safety and environmental protections; what amenities they would like to see, etc.

Marshall said there have been more than 500 responses so far, with about 39 per cent of them coming from Caledon residents. There have been 15 per cent from Brampton, 10 per cent from Toronto, five per cent from Orangeville, and the rest scattered throughout the Greater Toronto Area and beyond, with some coming from Quebec and Manitoba.

Most people visit the site between May and October, Marshall said. About two-thirds of the visitors stayed an hour or less, with about 15 per cent being there less than 15 minutes. Roughly 83 per cent said they were there to view and appreciate the site, while half wanted to photograph the area and 40 per cent were hiking along the Bruce Trail. About five per cent of respondents said they engaged in such activities as picnicking, star-gazing and educational activities. Approximately 25 per cent said they were there just to see the Badlands, while the rest were there to take advantage of other local amenities.

The trends from the survey so far indicate that 78 per cent have some concerns over safety, while 22 per cent are not worried. As well, 62 per cent indicated they would go to the site if their access was limited to viewing.

In terms of amenities they would be interested in, about 74 per cent said they would like to see reconfigured or improved trails, 69

per cent would want some form of observation decks or towers, 57 per cent favoured interpretive or educational installations on site, while 54 per cent called for interactive areas. A little more than half would want to see some form of furniture (benches, garbage cans, bike racks, etc.)

There were studies conducted before Dillon was brought into the project, and Marshall said that work has not been abandoned. "We are not redoing the ecological land classifications," she said, adding biologists have been to the site and their data will be used too.

"I value the work that's been done," one woman commented, adding she wanted to see more weight given to the scientific data, as opposed to the results of the survey. She didn't want public opinion to carry too much influence.

"There are valued flora and fauna that exist on the property," she said, adding it would be a faulty approach to pay too much attention to how the general public wants it used.

Fraser told one man the red shale was exposed about 100 years ago, after the topsoil was worn away from farming activity. He added a geologist from the university of Toronto has been measuring the erosion, and concluded about 10 per cent of it is the result of human traffic.

Kendrick Doll of OHT added water flows on the property have also contributed to the erosion, with the site losing about three metres since the 1970s. Between one and three centimetres are being washed away annually, he said.

Keeping people off the site might help slow the erosion down, Fraser observed.

One man said he's lived near the site for 15 years and has observed what happens on rainy days, with people leaving the site tracking red clay as they go. He added the fences that went up earlier this year have done a good job of keeping people out.

"I think the fence is the best thing you ever did," he declared. "Please don't take the fence down. It's working."

"It's amazing that people have respected that fence," another man added.

There were also calls to maintain the property as a nature reserve, and not an open-access park.

One woman said there seemed to be conflict in the guiding principles, between preserving the site and increasing access. Fraser said access could mean a couple of different things, like letting people get to some areas, but not others.

"Accessing doesn't necessarily mean opening up the site," he said.