

Region okays going ahead with parking lot

By Bill Rea

The proposed parking lot at the Cheltenham Badlands got a little closer to becoming reality last week.

Peel Regional councillors last Thursday agreed to release \$700,000 that had been set aside for the project. This came after area resident Bonnie Ledson asked council to wait until a comprehensive master plan for the site had been completed and approved by the Region and Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC). As well, Caledon Councillor Barb Shaughnessy led an unsuccessful effort to get the matter referred to staff and other agencies for more information.

“Sometimes it’s not a referral,” Mississauga Councillor Nando Iannicca observed. “It’s sometimes we don’t want to make a decision, one way or another, and I think we’re getting to the point where a decision needs to be made.”

The Badlands, located on the south side of Olde Base Line Road, east of Creditview Road, is one of Ontario’s geological treasures and one of the best examples of badland topography in the province. Due to removal of vegetation during land clearing and livestock grazing in the early 1900s, the topsoil has eroded into a series of hummocks and gullies, producing the distinctive landscape.

The 36.6-hectare property was acquired in 2002 by the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT), and is managed by the Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC). Today, the Badlands is recognized as a provincially significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI). Regional staff reported council had approved the construction of the parking lot in April 2014, in the interest of increasing safety in the area. At the time, \$1 million was set aside for the project, but the funds were put on hold later that year, as OHT brought in a consulting firm to come up with a master plan for the site.

In June 2015, the Region released \$300,000 for detailed design work of the parking lot. The rest of the funds were held, pending an appeal of the NEC approval of the lot that was launched by Ledson.

Staff also stated the Niagara Escarpment Hearing Office released its report last month, dismissing the appeal.

The staff report stressed that OHT has worked to engage the public on this issue, citing that seven meetings or forums have been held in the last year.

“Staff contends that every possible measure to make the area safe for visitors, pedestrians and drivers up to and including a physical closure of the site through construction of temporary exclusion fencing has been exhausted,” the staff report stated. “Despite the fencing, people still gravitate to the this site and pose a safety issue.”

Staff added OHT has come up with an interim infrastructure plan with a trail that will provide access from the parking lot to a viewing area at the east end of the Badlands feature. Actual physical access to the feature will be restricted.

The parking lot has always been seen as “a first critical step in the evolution of the site,” staff reported.

Other elements include a pedestrian walkway on the south side of Olde Base Line, an accessible spot in the parking lot, enhancement of an existing side trail, garbage and recycling bins, bike racks in the parking lot and the retention of the existing fencing.

Although the site has been closed for about a year, staff said people are still visiting, and creating potential hazards. The lack of parking and pedestrian facilities is a cause for these worries.

The Town is leading a committee to manage visitors to the area, with participation from OHT, Credit Valley Conservation, the Region and other agencies.

In her deputation to council, Ledson said the understanding had been the parking lot would be on hold until there was a comprehensive plan in place and approved for the site.

She said residents have seen “massive crowds” making their way to the site every weekend from May until winter. During such times, she said it was seldom there weren’t at least 15 cars parked around there. Since the fences have gone up, people still walk there.

“We still see people walking at least 1.6 kilometres to see the Badlands,” she remarked.

The parking lot is only slated to hold 33 cars. When hundreds of vehicles visit the area, she wondered how the excess is going to be handled, among other issues.

“Where are the viewing platforms?” she asked. “What costs will be incurred and who will pay the bill?”

Ledson also pointed out local businesses have reported declines because of the lack of tourist traffic, since the site has been closed. Public Works Commissioner Dan Labrecque told Mayor Allan Thompson the parking lot was seen as a safety measure, and not part of the OHT master plan. He added the \$700,000 was held back pending the result of the appeal. With the dismissal of the appeal, the Region has the authority to move forward.

Shaughnessy said she’s been getting lots of calls and emails from residents, raising concerns on this issue.

Some residents have stated they were never told the parking lot was going ahead without the master plan in place.

'They were really shocked and dismayed,' she said.

Shaughnessy also said there should be consultation with the cycling community. She pointed out cycling is a growing activity in Caledon, and contact should be made with clubs, as well as stores that cater to them.

As well, Shaughnessy was worried about the future of a cycling lane on the road, fearing it will be taken out to make room for the pedestrian sidewalk. That could mean cyclists could be forced on the road with traffic.

'Is this a good, safe thing to do?' she asked.

Councillor Annette Groves agreed.

'We do have a huge cycling community in Caledon,' she remarked.

She also pointed out that the previous Regional council had passed a resolution about getting a master plan in place, and it called on OHT and BTC to report back to the Region with updates, including the financial implications.

Labrecque said the current council last year gave staff direction to proceed because OHT was working on a master plan that did not involve the parking lot.

Groves also commented the 2014 resolution addressed community engagement, but she said she's been hearing from members of the public that's not been happening.

Labrecque countered they have been going to the public, and any feedback received is being built into the design.

In terms of accommodating cyclists, he told Thompson the speed limits on the road are lower, and that will help make up for the absence of bike lanes.

Shaughnessy argued the best place for a sidewalk would be inside the site, not outside.

She also pointed out the Highway Traffic Act now requires one metre of clearance between cars and bicycles. That's not going to be possible without cars crossing into the lanes of on-coming traffic.

'That's a huge issue,' she declared. 'That's a huge safety issue that I'm not prepared to sign onto.'

Caledon Councillor Jennifer Innis also opposed putting the matter off.

'This issue is safety,' she said. 'It's not safe to be walking along that road.'