

Residents don't want parking lot at Badlands

By Bill Rea

The people in charge of managing the Cheltenham Badlands believe creating a parking lot nearby would solve some of their concerns.

But they're going to have trouble selling that idea to the people who live in the area.

About 30 of them were out for a community meeting last week, and many of them were very vocal that they don't want a parking lot. 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.

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.

Peel Regional council in May approved the construction of a parking area just east of the site that would be able to accommodate 33 cars and two buses. There are also plans to set up a viewing area.

The Badlands are owned by the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT) and managed by Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC). The Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) has designated it an area of natural and scientific interest (ANSI). The concerns have been addressed by a working group representing a number of agencies, including BTC, MNR, Niagara Escarpment Commission, Credit Valley Conservation, Caledon Hills Bruce Trail Club, Caledon Countryside Alliance, the Town and the Caledon Environmental Advisory Committee.

Michael Sawchuck, manager of acquisitions and conservation services unit with OHT, said before the meeting that they had done a lot of work to find a location for the parking lot, and this was the only one deemed appropriate.

He also stressed that safety was the concern.

'It's a dangerous spot,' he said. 'We're trying to be proactive.'

BTC Executive Director Beth Gilhespy told last week's meeting this site represents one of the best examples of 'badland topography' in Ontario. The shale there is more than 445 million years-old and represents the base rock of the Niagara Escarpment. Its current condition came about through removal of vegetation from land clearing and animal grazing in the early 1900s. Gilhespy said it attracts a lot of visitors taking local trips or outings, and weddings have been held there too.

'It's also a really neat looking site,' she said.

Although the red shale is the most prominent feature on the site, Gilhespy said there's more to it, with the lands sloping into coldwater streams.

The site consists of 36.6 hectares that was acquired in 2000 to secure the Bruce Trail with a grant from MNR. The main trail cuts through the southwest portion of the property.

Gilhespy said the challenges with managing the site deal with the fact it's a popular tourist stop. Since there is very little in the way of designated parking, most visitors park at the sides of the very hilly road. The number of cars on the road are a source of safety concerns, Gilhespy said. As well, there are issues with garbage and littering, vandalism, the creation of rogue trails and erosion. She observed that a lot of the stewardship work involves cleaning up garbage, adding they bring in volunteers to help with that. She also said they have ordered more litter cans from the Region, but there's no word on when they'll be arriving.

Gilhespy also said most people visiting the site don't stay long. She said they've counted the cars and figured most stay there about 15 to 20 minutes.

'It's sort of a ticking time bomb, if you will,' she commented.

Kendrick Doll, natural heritage coordinator with OHT, told the meeting more signs have been ordered to tell visitors where they should and shouldn't go. There are also hopes that the main viewing area will protect the site.

One man at the meeting was concerned about the timing of the various efforts.

'Why can't we get garbage cans?' he wondered, charging they're talking about spending a lot of money for a parking lot, but can't get containers for litter. 'It seems to me you want to run before you can walk.'

Doll said they are trying to address issues of erosion too, adding the proposed parking lot is part of an overall management strategy for the site being developed by the Cheltenham Badlands Management Planning Team (CBMPT).

One woman suggested that if they prevented people from walking on the property, maybe they'd stop coming.

'It's a delightful thought,' she said.

Gilhespy stressed they are trying to manage both safety and conservation issues, but the woman suggested putting up a fence until

it's decided exactly what's to be done with the site and who's going to pay for it.

A man who lives on Olde Base Line near the site said putting in a parking lot will just attract more people to damage the lands and cause degradation to the hills, without really addressing the parking issue at all. He added all of these issues should be addressed in an entire package.

There were several at the meeting who charged conservation is not the top priority on the site. ?You should be ashamed of yourself,? one woman charged.

Doll maintained CBMPT has been working on the management plan, based on four guiding principles: Conservation of the property's cultural and natural heritage values; safety for all individuals who visit the site; improved accessibility for those who wish to access the site; and enhanced opportunities for interpretation and public education.

He added there is a threat to culture and heritage of the site,

In terms of safety, he said there's an obligation to act.

?We've been very lucky not to have had a fatality at the site,? he said. ?What we're dealing with is a life safety issue.?

Addressing the challenges has resulted in some interim measures.

Gilhespy said they have increased the involvement of Peel Region, and that has led to traffic calming measures, reduced speed limits, etc. They also had an erosion study conducted and put up signs advising people of the damage caused when the slopes are walked on.

?These are all people priorities, not conservancy priorities,? one woman charged.

There were comments that Olde Base Line is an important collector road for residents trying to get to Highway 10.

?There is no way to make Olde Base Line safe,? one man charged, adding putting in the parking lot ?is no answer whatsoever.?

He said if the parking is there, more people will come and the lot will fill up fast. He stressed the need for solutions that won't make things worse.

One woman suggested a shuttle bus to transport people from a gathering point to the site. She said there is a system like that in place for visitors to Stonehenge in England.

Sally Rook, project manager with the Region, said the idea of the parking lot is not to promote the site. She said it's already well promoted, thanks to social media.

Sawchuck said they're trying to look at this as broadly as possible. He added it would be great if everything could be implemented at once, but it has to be funded too. He said the money for the parking lot came available.

One woman suggested just putting up a fence around the site until everything can be funded.

There were also suggestions the parking lot is a done deal, but Gilhespy denied that. One woman wondered why they went to Peel for approval of the lot before going to the public.

Gilhespy also asserted this development has nothing to do with next year's Pan American Games.

Rook also said traffic studies have indicated the 33 spots in the parking lot will handle the demand in the area about 80 per cent of the time. They wouldn't be able to build a lot big enough to handle the heavier periods, like when people want to visit to view the fall colours.

Gilhespy said an option of limiting the amount of time a car can be in the lot could be looked into.

Another woman observed drivers visit Forks of the Credit Road during the fall, and there's no need of a parking lot there.