

More land added to Happy Valley Forest

By Mark Pavilons

A generous donation by a local resident has added more natural land to the Nature Conservancy of Canada's Happy Valley Forest. The conveyance of a 26-acre parcel to NCC came as good news to Township councillors, and the parties have vowed to work together to accommodate the needs of the local equestrian community.

The land swap included a transfer of the 26 acres from Mary Lou Rose on the 17th Sideroad, for heritage conservation purposes. The plan also requires the lands be 'sterilized' and protected from any building. A 2.2-acre piece will be transferred back to Rose for residential purposes.

The properties consist mainly of dense deciduous forest of Happy Valley. Under the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, conveying land for conservation is permitted and these transfers don't create any new lots for development.

As it stands, permitted uses of the land are restricted under the ORMCP zone category. Rose is further asking a more restrictive definition of Forest Management that manages woodlands and provides outdoor recreation activities.

There has been a request by local horse riders to have access to Happy Valley lands. The zoning will provide uses 'consistent with historic activity.'

Mark Stabb, of the NCC, said they purchased the adjacent piece from Ms. Rose and the transfer of the small portion helps her with the laneway. NCC has been working hard since 2001 putting together some 773 acres in Happy Valley for public use.

He said based on provincial models, public trails are typically used for hiking, not riding.

NCC is growing its network in King and piecing together parcels is like putting a puzzle together. He said it's a constant balance between public use and conservation.

He said he hopes to organize a meeting among trail users and get input from equestrians. He did point out that NCC doesn't manage horse trails and so has nothing to base their policies on.

He did say they are looking at equestrian use for the Glen Echo property, but there is work to be done before that happens. He hopes to work with the Township and equestrian community to create a sustainable trail network.

Catering to all interests is a juggling act.

A resident on the 7th Concession said NCC is a responsible organization and land donors typically want the acres preserved and conserved, not to create a 'playground' of sorts. It's still private property, he pointed out.

An 8th Concession resident said there are some great hiking trails in Happy Valley, used by local residents. Since King is part of 'Horse Country,' equestrian access should at least be considered.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti said the Township is working on a comprehensive trail strategy and it makes sense to bring everyone to the table to come up with a system that makes sense.

Councillor Linda Pabst said they've ridden their horses through Happy Valley for decades and it's traditionally been open for equestrians.

The equestrian sector in King needs to be supported she said, adding 'I hope we can work something out to make everyone happy.'