

Full Authority
17 September 2020
Agenda Item: 11

Conservation Areas Update

Background

The CVCA currently owns and operates four conservation areas and an agreement forest totaling approximately 1200 acres. They are Crowe Bridge Conservation Area, Callaghan's Rapids Conservation Area, The Gut Conservation Area, McGeachie Conservation Area and the Agreement Forest. All of these properties, except for the Agreement Forest have been acquired and meet the objective stated in Section 20 of the Conservation Authorities Act, R.S.O. 1990.

Objects

20 (1) The objects of an authority are to provide, in the area over which it has jurisdiction, programs and services designed to further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources other than gas, oil, coal and minerals. R.S.O. 1990, c. C.27, s. 20; 2017, c. 23, Sched. 4, s. 18.

Provincial funding at the time of the acquisition of these lands allowed for capital infrastructure and maintenance. This was particularly evident with the development of the Crowe Bridge Conservation Area's campground and swimming area.

Since the Provincial government no longer provides grant funding for conservation areas and a discretionary vote for conservation authority Boards, the reduction in funding has minimized the level of infrastructure improvements, replacement and maintenance, as well as the staffing resources to ensure this occurs. This made sense to reduce the financial resources at the time since there was so much additional pressure on the CVCA budget to deliver mandatory programs and services. The CVCA has been for over 30 years and continues to be the highest per capital levy in the entire province.

The above information is a thumbnail sketch of the unenviable position the CVCA is faced with at this time. It is simply a culmination of budgetary pressures and lack of provincial funding for small rural conservation authorities like the CVCA.

Therefore, the infrastructure framework which has been under stress for an extensive period of time, was put under more pressure due to the extenuating circumstances of COVID and its implications.

Crowe Bridge Conservation Area

- 26 Acres
- Day Use Side – Swimming area (weir across Crowe River maintains a significant area)
- Campground Side – permanently closed since 2007

During the course of the summer, Crowe Bridge Conservation Area (CBCA), which is leased by the Municipality of Trent Hills, came under extreme pressure as the Province relaxed its imposed directives.

Even in a non-COVID year, the increasing popularity of the conservation area has resulted in growing problems, such as overcrowding, lack of adherence to conservation area rules, “local vs non-residents” and overflow parking on municipal roads leading to safety issues.

For the 2020 season, Crowe Bridge was initially closed to comply with Provincial directives. As the Province relaxed its directives, Trent Hills made the decision to open CBCA but within a short time period, was inundated with visitors to the area as people sought recreational opportunities in rural Ontario. The overwhelming numbers exacerbated the above mentioned problems and forced the hand of the municipality to close Crowe Bridge for public safety concerns.

At this point, Crowe Bridge has been and will remain closed for the rest of the season.

Our Chair, Cathy Redden will be able to add additional details for the Board’s benefit should the Board wish to discuss the issue further.

Callaghan’s Rapids Conservation Area

- 400 Acres
- Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) Designation
- Small Waterfalls spanning the Crowe River
- Two trails to the river
- Caves

Callaghan’s Rapids Conservation Area is a unique piece of property which features two waterfalls which are approximately one meter in height and span approximately 40 to 60 meters across the entire width of the Crowe River.

Callaghan’s Rapids is an extremely unique and important natural environment 400 acres in size located on the Crowe River. The area has been designated as an ANSI since it is an area home to a variety of plant and animal species and is a geological link between the St. Lawrence lowlands to the south and the Canadian Shield to the north. It is this

transitional zone that provides the “base” for an exceptional diversity of flora and fauna, many which are rare and endangered.

The area is also a beautiful landscape with the pristine Crowe River flowing through the middle of the conservation area, which provides a home for a significant number of aquatic wildlife species and woodland animals which rely on it to flourish as well.

The original intent of the Crowe Valley Conservation Authority was to protect the natural environment of Callaghan’s Rapids Conservation Area while sharing it for the public to passively use it for walking, hiking, observing nature or for outdoor educational purposes. This is still the current objective of the CVCA.

However, for more than 30 years, abuse of the area has resulted in motorized vehicles that have created their own trails, illegal garbage dumping, unauthorized camping, vast amounts of broken glass, illegal campfires and other CVCA Regulation 103 violations.

The abuse of Callaghan’s has also been impacted by the increase of the number of visitors to the area due to COVID.

The infractions and illegal activity has not gone unnoticed by local residents and visitors to Callaghan’s.

Phone calls and e-mails from the public have been received during the summer about the situation. Ultimately, the CVCA was notified that a group of concerned residents had been loosely formed to discuss Crowe Bridge and Callaghan’s issues. Two meetings were held by the public.

Subsequent to this meeting, a letter was sent to the Board and is included in this agenda package under correspondence.

After the closure of Crowe Bridge, the group focused their efforts on Callaghan’s and proceeded to request a meeting with myself and Chair Redden. Jan O’Neil was also invited to the meeting.

Three representatives met and it was an excellent opportunity to share information regarding the illegal activities, increased usage of the area, the Eastern Ontario Trail Alliance (EOTA) trail that bisects the area and the challenges the CVCA has been faced with to curtail the vast majority of the transgressions.

Chair Redden confirmed the issue would be brought forward to the Board for discussion and next steps determined for the Authority. Working in collaboration with the residents, other various stakeholders and the Province will be key in arriving at a long term solution. In the meantime, short term goals should be the focus while preparing for next year and the longer term. If there is sufficient support from all interested parties, then a permanent solution will be attainable.

The CVCA issued a press release to raise awareness of the degradation of the natural environment.

A subsequent meeting was held with the residents group and an OPP officer from the Madoc detachment on the 1st of September. The meeting was productive and focused on many of the short term issues to target the majority of the users who would respect the natural environment. Signage, fencing and public education became the focus of the meeting.

At the same meeting, the residents committed to raising funds to hire paid duty officers to patrol and issue trespassing tickets to motorized vehicles on CRCA property.

Following the meeting, the CVCA produced a flier for the residents to distribute on the Labour Day weekend briefly outlining the natural importance of the area and the rules of Callaghan's. New signs have been made to post, however they were not available for the long weekend.

Although duty officers were not secured for the Labour Day weekend as planned, additional patrols were conducted by the OPP and its SAVE team (which is the unit that has skidoos, ATV's and boats).

The Officer Scott Underhill has reported the following:

"Yes I did get in to the Conservation area. Wrote a bunch of Trespass tickets to ATVer's. I did not see the signs. I wasn't looking before the bridge. I figured it would be on the rail bed at what looks to everyone as an ATV trail to the water. Also on the south side at the parking lot.

The Det officer's dropped by twice on Sunday as well. I have no issue with us (SAVE) being called. Just that this is a daily issue that needs to constantly patrolled until there is better signage and maybe large rock barriers to block the bikes. I also kicked a guy out who was camping and saw another family with a canopy set up with day camping stuff. I went on to the web site to see what people were aloud to do. Maybe a sign at each end as well showing was permitted. It's a beautiful site for sure."

Additionally, in an e-mail received on the 10th of September from Officer Underhill states:

"We spent a considerable amount of time over the last weekend patrolling and enforcing some provincial offences relating to Callaghan Rapids. In the email below I think it is important to note the recommendations from our officers that focus their work on trails. I feel that in order to activity continue to enforce these type of rules and regulation we need some help with proper signage. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to reach out."

“we did spend a significant amount of time there, thanks to our SAVE unit”

“I can tell you that we laid 23 PON’s this weekend, hopefully that helps and I highly suggest some large signage”



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Since the Labour Day weekend, Matt Caruana has invited myself for a meeting to discuss the results of the resident’s group meeting held on the 8th of September and next steps. A verbal update will be provided at the Board meeting.

Recommendations

Staff recommend the following steps be adopted by the Board to begin to address the ongoing and growing issues at Callaghan’s Rapids Conservation Area:

- 1) The Board provide the necessary support and resources for first steps to address the illegal activity at Callaghan’s Rapids Conservation Area in collaboration with the efforts of the residents group and the OPP.*
- 2) Invite other key stakeholders to share resources and expertise.*
- 3) Request CVCA staff approach other CAs with same issue and present a case to the Province for additional support.*
- 4) Proceed with signage – permanent and otherwise utilizing current resources available from a donation to the CVCA and in conjunction with assistance from the public.*
- 5) Fence off ATV parking area – which was placed illegally on the CRCA property utilizing current resources.*
- 6) Initiate planning for possible reclamation of property damaged by the illegal trail network.*

Board Decision

TP

The Gut Conservation Area

Similar to Crowe Bridge and Callahan's Rapids, The Gut Conservation Area has experienced an increase in people visiting the area. The GTA exodus seems to have reached the perimeter of approximately 2 to 2 ½ hours away.

Tim Conlin recently reported complaints of additional garbage on site and conducted an inspection of the situation himself. Tim removed the garbage and completed an inspection of the washroom for staff. Wasp nests were located in the washroom and staff have since prevented public access to the washroom for safety concerns. In addition, the barrier to the washroom has eliminated the requirement to clean the washroom to the standards set by the local health unit for the prevention of spreading COVID.

Tim Conlin also suggested that in order to maintain the road into The Gut parking lot, that the three local municipalities share the responsibility.

CVCA have been requested to investigate the right-of-way prior to the submission of Tim's proposal.

As well, Tim is suggesting that the entrance to The Gut possibly be relocated to remove the traffic hazard since it is situated on a curve. Further investigation will be required.

In addition, volunteers will be refurbishing the existing trails at The Gut and create a three km loop from the trail along the gorge to the ridge above, thereby giving trail users an enhanced experience. One of the volunteers works for Treadscape, the company which refurbished the McGeachie trails. The second lead volunteer is a Board member of the Hastings Development Trail Inc. and has previous trail experience.

In order to complete the work in a timely manner, additional volunteers may be required.

McGeachie Conservation Area

Trail and capital improvements to the McGeachie Conservation Area are nearing completion.

To date, the trails have physically been refurbished. For example, this includes portions of the trails that may need levelling, changing the trail to avoid significantly wet areas, alter the trail to bring it closer or farther away from an unique feature or even adding/removing material to make hiking less hazardous.

- The washroom installation is nearing completion.
- New signage will be installed.

- Directional arrows will be installed.
- A relaunch is scheduled for this fall (adhering to COVID social distancing rules).