

Highlands East mineral collecting site closed

By Angelica Ingram

A once popular site for mineral collectors and a favourite among tourism promoters is no more after it was sold by the Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce earlier this year.

Located in Highlands East near Gooderham and Tory Hill, Bear Lake Diggings is now private property, according to a notice posted on the chamber's website.

According to material published by the chamber of commerce, the site consisted of rocks that range from one billion to 1.76 billion years in age and offers a diversity of mineral specimens that display excellent formation and frequently attain an enormous size.

The material continued by stating the chamber employed a number of geologists and professionals to study the site and guide tours on the property.

An email sent out in May advised the public that earlier this year the Bancroft chamber listed the property for sale and in April 2016 it was sold to private individuals.

As a result the site was no longer available for public digging.

Chamber of commerce general manager Greg Webb told the paper the closure of the Bear Lake Diggings as a collection site was a decision made by the board of directors.

Local tourism promoter Barrie Martin was disheartened to hear the news, as it means less people will be visiting Highlands East and a popular geology site is no longer available to the public.

It was quite a shock to some of us who are involved in recreational geology, said Martin.

My Haliburton Rocks is a popular program that Martin offers, which introduces people to recreational geology. Martin said it is one of his most popular summer offerings, especially for families.

He used to take visitors to Bear Lake Diggings, as it was a reputable site and people would want to visit it.

It's a site that's known worldwide, he said. As far as a collecting site it was probably the most established and well known site, certainly in Haliburton County, if not the broader region.

The owner/operator of Yours Outdoors, Martin said the news of the closure also affects the region as the Ontario Highlands Tourism Organization spent time and money promoting recreational geology and mineral collecting.

When they [OHTO] were looking at developing tourism products or experiences they focused on the whole business of recreational geology, said Martin. There's been quite a bit of development in that area.

The development cost money, which OHTO funded, said Martin.

According to OHTO executive director Nicole Whiting, Bear Lake Diggings was a very popular destination for mineral collecting, one that they invested \$8,000 in. She said it's unfortunate it is no longer available.

We became aware of the significance of this site through our recreational geology product development initiative which concluded in March 2015, she wrote in an email to the paper. The execution of the project was managed by a very dedicated project

co-ordinator who worked with an enthusiastic steering committee of passionate volunteers to identify and follow through on opportunities to elevate the recreational geology experience in Ontario's Highlands. The Bear Lake Diggings was one such opportunity and was allocated \$8,000 of the budget to make improvements to the site.?

Whiting said despite the closure of the site they do not regret making the investment.

?The enhancements that were made added to the regional product offer for the time we were able to promote it. And it is not uncommon for us to be in a situation where we are having to adjust to the changing landscape of what our region has to offer because we don't own the tourism product we enhance and promote,? she wrote.

Martin said he has considered cancelling his membership to the Bancroft chamber because of this decision.

?I guess the frustration is how come that happened so suddenly?? he said. ?It's strange that you have a chamber that is supporting the whole concept of the Mineral Capital of Canada ... and then to do something like that just seemed to be shortsighted.?

Martin said all is not lost as there are other sites in the area that are open to the public for mineral collecting, although not as well developed.

Highlands East Reeve Dave Burton also stresses there are other sites available to the public and hopes more people visit them.

Burton said he heard about the site being up for sale a few months ago and while it was disappointing, it wasn't surprising, he said.

?I hate to see anything close up,? he said. ?I don't think it's the end of the world for us.?

Burton said when he first heard it was for sale he thought about the municipality buying it, however there were some issues with mineral and timber rights.

Bear Lake Diggings is listed on the municipality of Highlands East website, but now has been updated to inform the public it is no longer available for mineral collecting.