

Lack of snow has sweeping effects



Ribbons of caution tape and emergency pylons warn of hazards ahead, at the Heritage bridge, on trail B106E. This gateway between Bancroft and Ontario's trail systems has been severed and it is in need of repair. SARAH VANCE Special to This Week

By Sarah Vance

Trails in North Hastings continue to be silent due to unseasonably warm temperatures and a lack of snow. This is having a negative impact on the local economy whose off-season and winter revenue is fueled by this traffic.

"Snowmobiling makes up close to 80 per cent of our winter business," said the Porterville Diner, a restaurant in Lake St. Peter.

"We're easily accessible on some of the best trail systems in Ontario."

With a season that has yet to begin, the Town of Bancroft has a bigger problem to solve - the wash out by the Jack Brown Airport, that has wrenched apart the bridge from the trail.

The bridge is a vital resource that links the Town of Bancroft to 30,000 kilometres of interconnected trails in Ontario, including the Baptiste Loop, through Hastings Highlands.

Although the weather has provided a temporary reprieve, this gaping, impassable hole is a problem that cannot be ignored. Caution tape and emergency cones block the hazard that has closed the trail for cyclists and pedestrians alike.

"We are working towards a commitment of \$20,000 from the Eastern Ontario Trails Alliance," said Dewey Jordan, of the Maple Leaf Snow Skimmers, in an interview with Bancroft This Week. "But the municipalities will have to step up and recognize the importance of solving this problem."

The cost of repairing the railway bridge is estimated to be in the range of \$40,000.

Winter recreational sports have an economic impact on the region and they account for variable expenditures including fuel, oil, clothing, food and beverages. An assessment of the economic impact of snowmobiling, indicates that an average season generates \$853,263,840 spending in Ontario and the equivalent of 7,292 full-time jobs annually.

But as it stands now the connecting link to the Town of Bancroft is cut off.

"One of the ways that local towns are missing out generally is by not having more connecting links into their town centres," said Dewey Jordan. "We have identified ways that new trails could be cut in order to support access to local businesses in Hastings Highlands and Bancroft."

The Snow Skimmers oversee trails E109 west to Paudash and east to Combermere, as well as B106E extending south through Bancroft and north to Whitney, Madawaska, Mink and Baptiste loops. It is a not-for-profit organization, with a board of directors and a small, but loyal volunteer base.

?We are a member of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs,? said Jordan about the Snow Skimmers' 958 members whose income is derived from membership fees and local level fundraising; at Porterville Diner; a February Poker Run; and a summer golf tournament.

The North Hastings Heritage Trail consists of 300 km along the old IB railway line and it forms a ribbon of access to provincial routes. Trails Ontario estimates that the railway line attracts 10 million visitors every year.

It is expensive to maintain this system and the Snow Skimmers' annual groomer fuel bill is more than \$25,000.

?We do not have the financial resources to address the problem of the washout,? said Jordan. ?We are a small volunteer organization and our focus is on grooming the trails.?

To date, partial funding may exist through the Eastern Ontario Trails Alliance, however, the costs for solving this problem will be much greater. The onus will rest upon the community to co-ordinate a solution to this problem, which will grow in significance when the snow falls.

Despite the fact that the washout was first reported by Moose FM 97.7 on Dec. 16, the trail continues to be closed off by caution tape and all passage has been halted. Town councillor Paul Jenkins who oversees the trail systems on behalf of Bancroft residents, has yet to reply to a request for an interview.