

Opposition to sale of Wollaston's Nellie Lunn Park growing



By Chris Drost

On the afternoon of Aug. 26, at a special meeting of Wollaston council, a document was brought forward by clerk Bernice Crocker based on the results of an investigation by a committee struck in 2019 to look at the ongoing situation with Nellie Lunn Park. This document recommended the sale of the property with the plan to use funds raised in the sale towards a new fire hall for Wollaston.

Nellie Lunn is a 100-acre property that was gifted by Boleslaw Klincewicz to the Township of Wollaston in 1981 to be used as a park for recreational purposes. Issues around legal public access to the park have plagued it in recent years, and in particular, it helped prevent Wollaston from going ahead with the trail refurbishment project through Hastings Destination Trails Inc. more than two years ago. Instead, those funds from the Ontario Trillium Foundation were diverted to the Bancroft Eagles Nest Project which has now been completed.

According to a group of interested citizens calling themselves, Friends of Nellie Lunn Park, "this parcel of forest and wetlands contains the only non-motorized trail network in Wollaston Township. Council's rationale for selling it is based on a 2019 working group report that is incomplete and inaccurate. Selling the Park would be in contradiction to Wollaston's Strategic Plan, Asset Management Policy, and to the Hastings County Official Plan."

At press time, the Friends of Nellie Lunn Park was readying an application to make a delegation at the Aug. 9 meeting of council where a decision about the sale is expected to be made. In the interim, all efforts are being made to clarify public access to the property through the road allowance. Copies of the will designating the property to Wollaston have been obtained as well as the minutes of the council meeting where the township accepted the gift. Contact has also been made with the County of Hastings.

The Friends of Nellie Lunn has presented Bancroft This Week with the following seven reasons for not going ahead with the sale of Nellie Lunn Park, as well as questions for council. (listed below) They will be asking council to consider them carefully before making a decision.

It is their intention of The Friends of Nellie Lunn Park to offer an alternative to the sale of the property and in doing so, have gained the ear of the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council, a long-standing and much-respected organization in the community, that is also opposed to the sale of this park. BASC's request for a delegation on Aug. 9 was turned down with the clerk citing no more slots available.

Additionally, local cottager, Dale Barrett, launched an online petition called 'Save Nellie Lunn Park' under change.org on July 29. By the morning of July 30, it already had 507 signatures.

Nellie Lunn Park was a gift to the public, and for the future

Upon his death in 1981, the will of Boleslaw Klincewicz directed: 'To transfer and convey all my real estate located in the Township of Wollaston, in the County of Hastings, to the Town of Coehill [sic] for the purpose of a Park, and I direct that such Park shall be called the 'Nellie Lunn Park.'

For the sum of a \$2 conveyance fee, Wollaston became the owner and steward of a pristine 100-acre parcel of land honouring the wishes of a decorated World War II veteran and the love of his life, Nellie.

The family was again in contact with Wollaston Township in 2005 to reiterate the request to preserve the land for the purpose intended by Mr. Klincewicz. Following that, in March 2006 Wollaston's Nellie Lunn Park Committee proposed a bylaw calling for the Park to be held in perpetuity by Wollaston -- never for sale -- and that it be preserved in its natural state for public benefit and enjoyment.

The Friends of Nellie Lunn Park ask, 'Even if Wollaston Council can legally sell this land, what type of community would we be to sell out on the vision and legacy of people who give generously for the future benefit of all?'

It is the only non-motorized trail network in Wollaston Township

Nellie Lunn Park has the only non-motorized public trail network within Wollaston Township. Until it was closed by the council in fall 2020, Nellie Lunn was a much-loved safe destination for walking, hiking, mountain biking and snowshoeing/skiing. Removing these trails increases the use of the ATV trails by people looking for a place to walk dogs, hike, bike, etc. The ATV trails are very well-maintained by Coe Hill ATV Riders and riders are respectful of hikers/cyclists, but the multi-use trails are not a substitute for nature trails. Safety is a concern for all users - motorized and non-motorized alike.

If Nellie Lunn is sold, the closest non-motorized trail network would be McGeachie Conservation Area, a 25-minute drive from Coe Hill on Steenburg Lake Road. McGeachie is an amazing destination, but the large parking lot is already full many days.

The Friends of Nellie Lunn Park ask, 'will council and the ATV Club be spending additional resources to ensure safety on the multi-use trails, given the lack of other walking trails in the community? Will the closure of Nellie Lunn create additional pressure on McGeachie trail network?'

Nellie Lunn Park is part of Wollaston's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan

The Wollaston Township Community Strategic Plan 2018-2022 identifies Nellie Lunn as a key part of the tourism and economic development strategy.

One of the action items in the strategy is to 'develop and implement plans for creating a well-developed trail network at Nellie Lunn Park and beyond' with a timeline of 2019. Supporting the trail network at Nellie Lunn is a stated priority of Wollaston. For this Action item, the strategic plan also outlines the resources required and establishes metrics of success, some of which have already been achieved (e.g., parking area).

The Friends of Nellie Lunn Park suggest funding opportunities from governments at all levels, and partnerships with other recreational and economic development organizations should be fully explored before contemplating the sale of this asset.

The Friends also asks whether Wollaston council has pursued partnerships and co-funding with Hastings Trails and other stakeholders and has it informed these stakeholders about the proposal to sell? If the council proceeds to offer the property for sale, would it be conditional on the continued use of the lands for their intended purpose, i.e. as a park, so it would still be of benefit for the public? Would parks or conservation groups be given ?right of first refusal? for the sale? How will the land value be assessed? The 2019 working group cites a list of ?problems? with the property, and if so, there may be little interest in buying it and/or the revenue generated would be low; is a small amount of short-term gain worth the ?forever? cost of losing this asset?

Nellie Lunn Park is part of a network of trails

According to Hastings County - Wildly Authentic Wollaston - Nellie Lunn Park, the park is a must place for a visit and that the 100-acre nature preserve is open to the public and only accessible by foot along a trail in and around Urbach Lake. The Friends of Nellie Lunn Park ask how council proposes to replace Nellie Lunn Park if it removes this asset from our community and from the network of trails?

The proposal to sell Nellie Lunn is short-sighted and lacking evidence it would be a sound decision.

The Wollaston Township - Asset Management Policy November 2019 states that the township shall be evidence-based and forward thinking and should consider demographic and economic trends in the county. The Friends maintain that the information circulated in the July 26th meeting package cannot be considered evidence-based nor forward-thinking. Rather, it is based on a 2019 working group report that the group considers incomplete as it omits any consideration of the current and potential benefits of Nellie Lunn Park. The Friends state that there is abundant evidence that parks bring a multitude of benefits across three broad categories: environmental, economic, and health/social benefits, but these are not included in the report. In fact, ?the report is essentially a chronology of events, not an analysis; because it does not explain the methodological approach to data collection or analysis, it is difficult to see how the conclusions were drawn,? according to the Friends.

The Friends of Nellie Lunn believe there are key economic benefits to the park. These include improved attractiveness to homebuyers and businesses, in addition to increased tourism, property values and tax revenues. ?Attracting investment to Wollaston will be key to our ability to improve our infrastructure and services, including the firehall. We also need to sustain our infrastructure in the long-term, and preserve quality of life for all our residents.?

The Friends also cite the social benefits of parks including improved physical health and reduced obesity especially in children; social inclusion; improved mental health; educational opportunities (field trips, outdoor classrooms); sports and recreation; community-building through volunteering; and more.

The Friends question whether council has done an analysis of the economic, social and environmental benefits of Nellie Lunn Park, or just costs via the 2019 report? They ask on what grounds can council justify selling Nellie Lunn Park when this action would contradict the Wollaston Township Strategic Plan and Asset Management Policy, and the Hastings County Official Plan?

Let's give Nellie Lunn Park a chance According to The Friends of Nellie Lunn Park, current and previous councils ?have not committed to the vision articulated for Nellie Lunn Park since it was gifted the township 40 years ago. As a result, it has not achieved its full potential and the township and the Wollaston community are losing out on significant economic and social benefits. For once and for all, it's time to resolve any problems with signage and access, working with the potential funding partners already identified. We need to collect data in a comprehensive analysis that will support evidence-based decision making and long-term planning. The importance of doing so is underscored by Wollaston's own Strategic Plan 2018-2022, Asset Management Policy, and the Hastings County Official Plan.?

The Friends questions whether the elected or appointed leaders of the community will commit to giving Nellie Lunn Park a chance to fulfill its vision for the benefit of all.

We should reject the idea of selling 96.7 per cent of Wollaston's recreation services land.

Nellie Lunn Park at 39.3 hectares comprises 97.7 per cent of Wollaston's land assets in the category of LAND-Recreation Services. (a total of 40.68 hectares) The land asset sizes are according to the Wollaston Township Asset Management Plan 2019.