

Upgrades to local trails nearing completion

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By Chris Drost

After long delays, Hastings Destination Trails Inc. has all but put the finishing touches on the refurbishment of three local and well-loved trail systems at McGeachie Conservation Area, Bancroft's Eagles Nest Park and The Gut. This project, an initiative of the North Hastings Economic Development Committee and coordinated through HDTI, was funded largely through the Ontario Trillium Foundation. While the project has changed direction a number of times over the past two years since the initial funding announcement in Hastings Highlands on March 12, 2019, it has finally wrapped up the trail improvements. The installation of up-to-date signage is still to come this fall.

"The HDTI focus is on multi-use non-motorized trails and it plans to continue to build partnerships with landowners in Hastings County, municipal landowners, and Conservation Authorities. Our goal is to help coordinate and collaborate unified funding opportunities and have a larger voice as a lobbying group. In addition, organizations like the Ontario Trails Council, Hike Ontario, North Hastings Economic Development Committee, Hastings Prince Edward Public Health, local BBIAs, etc. are identified as key stakeholders that fall within our collaboration umbrella. All member groups will continue to function autonomously, while being able to tap into the invaluable resources of the larger group," says HDTI chair, Cathy Trimble.

"The existing trail network supports a diverse range of user groups. A significant number of volunteer groups are involved in the maintenance and development of these trails, which benefit from strong community support. We have built our foundation on the efficient, thoughtful and purposeful use of volunteers and have strong business processes and documentation to manage and reward them," added Trimble.

Eagles Nest There has been a lot of pent up demand from the public to visit Eagles Nest, and in particular having the chance to take in the vista over the York River valley during the peak of the colour season. When the barricades came down and people began to filter into the park, they saw some major changes to the trail system in the area of the popular viewing platform, "The Hawkwatch." One of the trails to the viewing area is now compliant with the requirements of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, making it now possible for those with mobility limitations to get out on a trail. Two barrier free washrooms have also been added at the upper parking level. Priority was given to other trails in the park, that have had improvements some rerouting where needed, to improve not only the experience, but the safety of everyone visiting the park.

HDTI had a lot of generous support from the Town of Bancroft, Stewards of Bancroft Eagles Nest Park and community volunteers, to bring the project to fruition. HDTI and the town have been pleased with the work carried out by the trail builders at Treadscape.

"I had the opportunity over the past couple of days to tour the trails at Eagles Nest Park and it is fantastic. There are more visitors than I have ever seen and they were all truly impressed. As special thanks to everyone involved in this and past projects," says Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins.

While the wayfinding arrows have been installed, much of the new signage with updated maps is still in production but is expected to be installed before the snow flies. While the delay in the new signage has caused a bit of confusion in the short-run, in the long-run the new signs make it easier and safer to visit all the trails in the park.

In the interim, the first nature programming initiative on the revamped trail system is underway, Nature Connects on Eagles Nest, an interpretive program with Virginia deCarle as facilitator. It runs Friday mornings from 10 am to noon and people of all ages are welcome. This is an initiative of the Town of Bancroft with coordination by SBENP and financial support from TD Friends of the Environment.

McGeachie Conservation AreaAt McGeachie Conservation Area trails have been refurbished by Treadscope. There have been some improvements made to the parking lot, new accessible washrooms added and new signage will soon be installed. ?We at Limerick Township are most excited for the re-launch of our McGeachie Trail System. This, we believe, will bring commerce to our township by way of increased tourism resulting in more economic development and potential growth. It has been an ?all hands-on board? attitude within our staff and particularly the Infrastructure department by providing many hours of labour and material together with equipment to bring this project to fruition,? says Limerick's Mayor Carl Stefanski.

The GutWhile a late addition to the project, trail improvements have been made at The Gut Conservation Area on the South Road, just west of Coe Hill. In this case, the students of the Northern Outdoors Studies class from North Hastings Highschool got their hands dirty clearing the trail and creating a loop. New signage still needs to be completed and the addition of accessible washrooms will have to wait for further funding to become available. ?While The Gut is not actually in Wollaston township, we have these outdoor resources in our community that get more people out enjoying them. Especially because of COVID-19, the trails are a great way to get out and enjoy nature,? says Mayor Barb Shaw from neighbouring Wollaston Township.