

Grey Highlands to work with Friends of Kimberley Forest

(by Don Crosby)

Grey Highlands is lending its support to the Friends of the Kimberley Forest.

Stew Hiltz, chair of the Friends of the Kimberley Forest steering committee, came before council late last year asking for support on the part of council, as the group moves forward with its 12-step stewardship strategy.

The group is pulling areas controlled by different agencies into one destination and looking at management options.

Council asked CAO Dan Best to provide suggestions on which form the support should take. In his December report to council, the CAO recommended it be in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The Kimberley Forest stretches nearly 2.5 kilometres along the west side of the Beaver extending north from the Beaver Valley Ski Club nearly to the former Talisman ski resort. It consists of a large tract of public land running all the up from the Beaver River at the bottom of the valley to the 7th Line on the west.

North and west of the provincial Crown lands managed by the Ministry of Natural Resource are the Wodehouse Karst property owned by the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority and Kimberley Springs now owned by the Bruce Trail Conservancy.

The entire area is located within Grey Highlands.

In 2014, a group was formed entitled the Friends of Kimberley Forest that included all of the major recreational user groups.

In addition, the MNR, the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority and Bruce Trail Conservancy are part of the local volunteer steering committee, which meets regularly working towards a cooperative agreement on improved management.

Councillor Cathy Little, the council's liaison on the committee, agrees that having a MOU is preferable to being a committee of council.

"Having a memorandum of understanding with a community group is seen to be better in the long run for both community and the community group. It gives the community group a little bit more autonomy... than with a committee of council, where everything runs through council," she said during a recent interview.

"I think it's a good alternative especially if the group is helping implement the (the municipality's) strategic plan. You kind of agree on how you support each other's mutual goals rather having to run everything through council if you're a committee of council."

Best notes in his report to council that among the list of priorities for the steering committee are development of a trail map, signage at entrances and creation of assigned parking areas.

The municipality controls at least one access point to the proposed Kimberley Forest on an unopened road allowance.

Municipal staff met with members of the Friends of Kimberley Forest in December and discussion focused on key areas: a more focused multiyear action

plan, advocacy in opening key doors for the group, and sustainability.

Best said the MOU would help with the group's incorporation, so that it can become a more formal entity on its own. That will make it easier to seek out partnerships and funding opportunities.

Little said having a relationship with the municipality might allow the group to draw on the resources of the municipal staff member with skills in the area of writing grant applications.

"The other advantage we see to being a part of the municipality is some

advocacy, a little more credibility in negotiating some sort of agreement between the conflicting policies of the Niagara Escarpment Commission and the Ministry of Resources," said Little.

Although the Friends of Kimberley Forest are feeling the frustration of being tied up in the bureaucratic red tape of the various agencies involved in the property, that hasn't stopped them from taking some steps forward.

They are working closely to develop trails with Grey Sauble Conservation, which owns about 100 acres of the proposed forest and the Bruce

Trail Association.

The Bruce Trail Association has agreed to develop a side trail that will run up through the Wodehouse Karst property and link into the main trail.

Little said the group is working toward trail preparation on the GSCA property. It plans to offer interpretive walks later this spring or early summer when the Karst formation becomes active.

The GSCA contains a significant Karst sink hole on the property. Spring runoff creates a large lake over the sink hole and floods all the

way down to the Beaver Valley Ski club and goes over the escarpment as a waterfall for only a few weeks in the spring.

Little said she has been assured by at least one other committee member that activity of the Karst sink would attract visitors to the area from different parts of the world.

"Our committee has been quite active despite our frustrations... It will be nice for the community, the neighbours, the people who are interested in what we are doing to see something actually physically there," she said.

The Flesherton

Advance

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