

■ **ENVIRONMENT:** Many concerned about ecologically sensitive area of Beaver Valley

# User groups, public involved in drawing up management plan for Kimberley Forest

**DON CROSBY**

Sun Times correspondent

Public concern over the conditions of Crown land along part of the Niagara Escarpment in Beaver Valley has lead to calls by local residents for a plan to manage the sensitive ecosystem.

The area, loosely referred to in the past as the Wodehouse Karst, is now being called the Kimberley Forest. It consists of 739 acres of provincial Crown land under the management of the Ministry of Natural Resource, a 75-acre parcel owned by the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority and a tract known as Kimberley Springs that belongs to the Bruce Trail Conservancy.

Following a public meeting organized by the Ministry of Natural Resource in the spring, a committee of residents was established to come up with management options for the lands.

Craig Todd, a partnership specialist with Ministry of Natural Resources and a member of the steering committee, was surprised at the response from a community eager to see something done soon to protect the fragile environment.

"I didn't realize that people had such a connection to this property ... I'm very optimistic how this will turn out because of that intense

interest from the local community," Todd said.

The Kimberley Forest is about 1,000 acres in size extending west from the Beaver River in the bottom of the valley up to the 7th Line and north from the Beaver Valley Ski Club to the former Talisman Resort.

The escarpment slopes on the property are sugar maple forest, riddled with trails originally established for cross-country skiing about 40 years ago. More than a half a dozen groups — hikers, horseback riders, mountain bikers, hunters, cross-country skiers, snowmobiles and ATVers — all compete for use of the bush.

The Crown land was expropriated about 60 years ago with a plan to develop a public ski club, but that never happened and the property has been left unmanaged. The MNR has a policy of unrestricted access to all users of the Crown lands.

In recent years the lack of a management has lead to severe erosion on some trails, especially those running up and down the slope of the escarpment — some of it naturally caused but mostly by mechanized vehicles.

"I was in there a couple of weeks ago and you could say it's almost become an ATV park. It's just awful," said Cathy Little, pres-

ident of the Beaver Valley Nordic Ski Club and member of the steering committee. "Given that it's on the escarpment there is so much potential for erosion. Maybe people go in there thinking they're not doing anything wrong because there are no signs telling them they can't go in."

Committee member Theresa Tindall, whose husband's family has owned property adjacent to the Crown land for the past 30 years, has also seen extensive damage to the trails, especially in the past few months, by both ATVs and trucks.

"We have a picture of 10 ATVs blocking our driveway," said Tindall, who wants Grey Highlands to blo.

The Wodehouse Karst, a significant provincial geological site with multiple sink holes, is in the forest and brings water bubbling to the surface creating muddy conditions, said Stew Hilts, who lives within three kilometres of the Crown land. He represents the Bruce Trail Club on the committee.

Hilts supports the initiative to reach some agreement on how to manage the forest through a cooperative approach.

"I think it's going to take some time ... people from the ATV club and the snowmobile club are

involved, every user group you can think of has come forward and is willing to talk about things," he said

Vera Lloyd, outgoing president of the Dufferin-Grey ATV Club and treasurer of the steering committee, said the club doesn't use the Crown land for its trail system through the area.

"When we got the OK to ride ATVs within the area we just stayed totally away from the area because we knew what was happening in there," Lloyd said.

The ATV club is committed to cooperating in developing a management plan that suit all users while protecting the environment.

Lloyd said part of the club's contribution will involve educating the public and rogue riders, who don't share the same respect for the environment.

"There's still a lot of rednecks out there that still think they can do whatever they want. There's rednecks in every club and all we can do is educate them ... it's like telling people not to drink and drive or to put on their seatbelts," she said.

The steering committee meets on the third Thursday of the month except December in Kimberley. A second public meeting is planned for next spring to review the committee's proposals.