

# Day-long meeting discusses Rails to Trails

BY PAUL NICHOL

A crowd of 135 people attended a public meeting in Linwood on Saturday, February 25 to discuss the proposed conversion of the recently abandoned Goderich-to-Guelph CP Rail line into a recreation trail. Representatives from several interest groups were in attendance to share information and express viewpoints, both in favour of the trail, and in opposition to it.

The meeting was organized by the Rails to Trails Committee, a sub-group of the Maitland Trail Association. The Committee is proposing that the provincial government assume ownership of the corridor, and allow for its public use as a multi-use recreational trail. The purpose of the meeting on Saturday was to allow public input for the Committee to gather support for its initiative, and to table all concerns of adjacent landowners and others in opposition to a trail. The Committee was to forward all issues and concerns to the Interministerial Committee on Railway Abandonment when it presented its proposal in Toronto on Feb. 28.

The day-long meeting began at 10 a.m. at the Linwood Community Centre, and was facilitated by Paul Carroll from Seaford. In the morning session, a discussion panel provided background information on the Rails to Trails concept. The panel was composed of four members from the Rails to Trails Committee, a graduate student from the University of Guelph familiar with the issue, and a representative from the Ontario Trails Council.

Rod Lafontaine, Joan Van den Broeck and Susan White presented the Committee's proposal to have the province assume ownership of the corridor, and allow a coalition of user groups to operate it as a multi-use trail for hikers, cyclists, trailriders, skiers and snowmobilers.

Paul Nichol, a graduate student in Rural Planning and Development from the University of Guelph, suggested to the meeting that several similar cases of successful rails-to-trails conversions already exist in Southern Ontario which have not caused substantial problems for adjacent landowners. Mavis McCallum, secretary to the newly formed Ontario Trails Council, outlined the basis for that organization's support in creating

new recreational areas from abandoned railway corridors just like the Goderich to Guelph line. Following the panel presentations, members of the audience were invited to speak to the issue and presented information in light of support or opposition to the trail.

In the afternoon, the audience was divided into three discussion groups, including potential user groups for the trail, public officials representing municipalities along the line, and adjacent landowners. The discussion session was designed to gather input from all interested and concerned parties so that issues could be registered with the Rails to Trails Committee.

User groups, representing hiking, snowmobiling and trail riding associations confirmed their commitment to work together as a

coalition for converting and operating the proposed trail. In addition, the new coalition has expressed commitment to solving the problems and concerns brought forward by opposition groups.

From the municipal standpoint, the public officials' group was unwilling to express support or opposition toward the trail concept. However, there was a consensus that the line should remain as a continuous parcel owned by the province of Ontario. If turned over to the municipalities or individual landowners, the line would likely cause complex problems of liability and maintenance. It was agreed that the maintenance of the line as a continuous parcel was preferable given its potential use as a utility or transportation corridor in the future.

Concerns expressed by local landowners centred around issues of maintenance, liability, vandalism, loss of privacy and potential restrictions placed on their farming operations. Uncertainty about those issues has led to opposition from many landowners toward the trail concept.

A blow was dealt to the Rails to Trails cause when the Mennonite community withdrew its support. Initially, the Mennonite community had expressed interest in using the line as an alternative buggy and sleigh route, and had co-operated with the Rails to Trails Committee in organizing Saturday's meeting. However, it became apparent that the width and topography of the line are presently unsuitable for that purpose. As a result, the

Mennonite community could not support the trail initiative.

Saturday's public forum generated a substantial list of issues for the Rails to Trails Committee to consider. The Committee was to present its Interministerial Committee on Railway Abandonment Tuesday in Toronto. It is expected that the Interministerial Committee's response to the proposal will take some time to process. In the meantime, the newly formed user group coalition will meet regularly to broaden its support base and deal with the concerns presented. The group is confident that all potential conflicts can be effectively resolved with the co-operation of opposition groups. The first user group meeting is scheduled for April 11 at the Linwood Community Centre.

## Hullett won't hurry railway decision

Hullett Township Council will take its time making a decision on what it would like to see done with the abandoned CP Rail right of way through the township councillors told a group of ratepayers at a meeting in Londesboro Friday night.

About 20 people, most of them landowners along the CP line, crowded into the Hullett Township council chambers to discuss what would be done with the line. But although most were firmly against a proposal to turn the rail line into a multi-purpose trail and wanted the land turned back to the farmers through whose farm the line passed, councillors said they weren't ready yet to make a decision on what direction it will take. "I feel we shouldn't take a position prematurely," Reeve Tom Cunningham told the ratepayers. "We will, I would hope, take a position but only after hearing all the facts." He pointed out that there are other possible uses for the land other than the trail or turning it back to the farmers, the Project ReRail plan for a regional railway, for instance. He noted that council hadn't had a presentation from that group as yet.

When asked by Larry Plaetzer, one of the most vocal opponents to the trail proposal at the meeting when a decision could be expected, Reeve Cunningham said council would have to decide how imminent a change in the situation

might come. While there is a lot of urgency being expressed these days, particularly as trail supporters try to gain momentum for their project, the Reeve said he suspected that the provincial government would move a lot slower on the project than the haste indicates.

Reeve Cunningham said that to him the proposal of Project ReRail makes the most sense, that he had been surprised that the railway had closed in the first place. The move, he said, might have been premature. Councillor Ron Gross said that at a recent Good Roads Association convention he'd learned that one truck loaded with salt does as much damage to a road as 10,000 cars. Pushing traffic off the railways and onto the roads was going to be costly for the road system.

The meeting heard most of the same arguments, both in support of a trail system and against it, that have been discussed in the last few weeks.

The lone proponent of the trail concept was Joan Van den Broeck of Colborne Township, who outlined not only the trail proposal but other alternatives that could happen for the railway lands. In the United States, she said, the government has decided to bank all the abandoned railway land in case there is ever a need to rerail. If the land is banked it's then a case of deciding what to use it for in the meantime. It could, she said, be

used as a provincial park, either with government or private management. It could be just left the way it is. It could be, in a proposal she personally supported, be used as a safe roadway for Mennonites in the Elmira area, letting them travel in a direct route but away from heavy motorized traffic. It might be kept for the possibility of a utility such as a water pipeline to the Kitchener-Waterloo area from Lake Huron.

The position of the Rails to Trails committee is that the province develop the corridor as a linear park. This part of Ontario hasn't benefitted from the boom that the "Golden Horsehoe" area has enjoyed, and a trail would help put dollars into the community, benefiting the rural economy.

When a questioner suggested the trail would be very boring she agreed that the portion between Walton and Milverton is very boring and she couldn't imagine anyone walking the stretch but for people on tough "mountain" bicycles, the trip wouldn't be a challenge.

Bernice Gross worried how motorized vehicles could be kept from going into neighbouring fields. Ms. Van den Broeck said her group has asked for specific legislation to put teeth into trespass laws to protect landowners. When Allan Craig wondered how such laws could be enforced, Ms. Van den Broeck said that if the province can't do the job properly, they shouldn't do it at all. Local landowners shouldn't be put at risk.

Reeve Cunningham said he was worried about the liability situation for landowners. Would the trespass laws protect farmers if a trail user came onto their property and was hurt? Ms. Van den Broeck said that is why her group has asked for specific assurances.

Asked for the cost of the project Ms. Van den Broeck said she could

## Nora Stephenson wins Heritage Hunt

Nora Stephenson of Brussels is the winner of the Heritage Hunt that appeared in The Citizen in the February 15 issue of the paper. The "hunt" featured buildings or portions of buildings from as far afield as Henfryn in the east and Auburn in the west. There were several people who obviously took the time to tour the area and collect the right answers. Of those who did, Nora's was the lucky entry drawn. She will receive dinner for two at the Brussels Hotel.

For those who want to satisfy their curiosity here are the correct

only hazard an educated guess. Based on the most expensive trail conversion project in the U.S. where paving had been done for a bicycle path, the cost of this trail might be \$5 million. There is no provision for a paved bicycle path in this proposal. The biggest expense is planking the bridges and putting up guard rails, she said. Some of the haste of the supporters of the project is to keep bridges from being torn up that would have to be replaced at great costs.

There were many objections for which there were no answers. Gordon Gross said the trail would be too dangerous with open ditches along the side of the railway line in many places. Arnold Egli said he and his wife are ardent trail users but when they use trails in the area there are almost never people on them. We should concentrate on using present trails more instead of building new ones that would be very boring, he said. He said he saw so many disadvantages to the trail proposal.

Larry Plaetzer said that people who live along the Bruce Trail wouldn't want the trail to go through their property again. The trail users cannot be policed, he said. The only position landowners could see is that the railway land should go back to the farms from which it originally came, he said.

Gordon Gross said that he had taken up a petition from landowners near the track and all but one of the people contacted "were dead against" a trail.

Ms. Van den Broeck said that her group is still in the early stages of its research and she knows there are concerns. "We haven't solved all the problems of the landowners," she said. If the project goes ahead the group would want landowner representation on the planning group.

answers. 1. Duff's Church Walton (south side). 2. Blyth municipal office. 3. Knox Church, Ethel. 4. Londesboro United Church. 5. The Cameron Homestead of Cranbrook. 6. Belgrave United Church. 7. The Osborne residence, Dinsley Street East, Blyth. 8. Auburn Library (the former fire hall). 9. The tile yard at Henfryn. 10. The tower at Dunedin bed and breakfast, William Street, Brussels. 11. The Carnegie Library in Brussels. And No. 11, the toughest of them all, decorative work from the Brussels Sc to \$1.00 store.

Thanks to all who entered.

## The International Scene

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turning out all sorts of data but it has to be seen to be believed. They would have us accept that the Soviet economy grew by a remarkable five per cent last year after averaging a steady four percent from the beginning of the 1980's. If that is the case, why are things in such bad shape. We have had somewhat the same figures in Ontario and you do not have to look far to see the results of such growth. The Russians should be so lucky!

Even Mr. Gorbachev's economic advisor has got around to admitting that in all honesty there was no growth to speak of since the beginning of the 1980's. He did not get around to talking about 1987 but, if there has been growth, nobody has noticed it. The prevailing mood is one of a depression, not a boom period.

Then there is that chronic problem called inflation. Ask 100 Russians what it really is and you will get 100 answers. Officially it is

supposed to be around one per cent. That, too, is something of a myth. Another of Mr. Gorbachev's economic advisers let slip that the true figure is something in the nature of 5 - 7 per cent; that, too, may be a mirage but is sounds much closer to what might just be happening.

Finally, there is the question of a budgetary deficit. We know all about that in Canada since we have one of about \$28 billion a year or about six per cent of our Gross Domestic Product, the statistic we use to measure the growth of our economy. What the Russian deficit was might be considered one of their many state secrets but finally it has come out at something in the neighbourhood of 35 billion roubles. Since nobody can decide at the present time just what a rouble is really worth, it is no good trying to give you a figure in Canadian dollars. However, if one sticks to roubles, it works out to about 11 per cent of the Russian GDP or almost twice the Canadian deficit.

And we think that we are in bad shape!

Part of the unreliability of the Russian figures can be traced to the practice of Russian factories to keep two sets of statistics - the real ones and the ones they use in order to qualify for bonuses or to show the Kremlin that they have indeed met their quotas under the current five-year plan. No wonder Mr. Gorbachev is a mite upset about the state of his statistical reporting; without reliable figures how is he going to be able to take the necessary remedies? There are, to be sure, enough things that have to be remedied but where to start?

Russia would like to join such organizations as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. To do so the Kremlin must provide adequate and accurate statistics. It's going to be a long wait. As one western newspaper pointed out, will the world believe what Russia says about the size of its army when what it says about the size of its economy is so obviously false.