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Should motorcycles be allowed in County forest?

By Marni Walsh

The ratepayers' organization Conserve Our Rural Environment (C.O.R.E.) is encouraging supporters to voice their opinion and submit a written response to the Dufferin County Forestry plan to allow a ?one-day trial motorcycle event? in the Randwick Tract of the forest.

C.O.R.E. is strongly opposed to the event.

The Forest Operation Review Committee (FORC), created in 2014 to explore future recreational uses permitted on the County's 13 tracts, has proposed County Council consider a trial, single day, non-competitive, recreational off-road motorcycle (RORM) event, to take place.

The Randwick Tract is 289 acres located west of Airport Road at County Road #21 in Mulmur Township.

FORC Committee members include Warden Laura Ryan (Chair), Al Buck (Public Member), Johnny Yeaman (Public Member), Colleen Mitchell (Public Member), Shelburne Deputy Mayor Geoff Dunlop, Anne Marie Roussy (Public Member), John Riley (Public Member), and County Staff: Darrell Keenie, DCMA General Manager, Caroline Mach, County Forest Manager, Rebecca Whelan, Information Management Coordinator, and Steve Murphy, Emergency Management and Communications Coordinator.

The event proposal put forth by the Committee asserted: public feedback forums indicated support for controlled RORM use on Dufferin County Forest lands; the Randwick Tract size, location and terrain were suitable for the proposed event; equestrians, mountain bikers and hikers did not use the Randwick Tract due to a lack of a suitable trail network; the proposed RORM event would not conflict with any other user groups; and that single track trails could be created with minimal impact.

The proposal also put forth ?costs for the development of trails and the running of the event would be borne and provided by Dufferin Rooftop Recreational Riders Association? (DRRRA) off-road motorcycle club or the Ontario Federation of Trail Riders (OFTR;) and that a new trail would be approved by the Dufferin County Forester prior to its use, and once the new trails were established, they would be available to other ?appropriate user groups.?

The Dufferin Rooftop Recreational Riders Association told the Free Press, ?There is no cost or tree cutting required to create a single track trail through the forest. A potential route is created with flagging tape then approved or adjusted for approval by the County Forest Manager. Volunteers then walk the route picking up and moving any logs or sticks on the ground. Some pruning of dead or low branches may be required but nothing of significance or detriment to the health of a tree of the forest.?

Like CORE, Chris Hare, President of the DRRRA, is also encouraging their group's supporters to voice their opinion to the County.

Mr. Hare says, ?The modern controversy over prohibiting off-road motorcycles from the Dufferin County Forest is not evidence-based. The only way to make an educated evidence-based decision is to evaluate the forest and the forest neighbours before and after a trial single day event. It is my understanding that is why the Dufferin Forest Operation Review Committee came up with the proposal.?

Mr. Hare, who rode his motorcycle through the forest at a time when it was still permitted, claims, ?It wasn't destruction of property or noise that closed the trails to off-road motorcycles - it was the fear of liability and fear that the county could be sued.?

But, he says this is no longer an issue as all organized trail rides in Ontario carry $5,000,000 insurance coverage.?

However, opponents of the trial event, including the citizen's groups CORE and MC2, point out that the Dufferin County Forest Management Plan and the Draft of the Recreation and Culture section clearly states, ?Motorized vehicles, other than snowmobiles, are not permitted in Dufferin County Forest.? CORE stresses that the plan further states that the County's goal is ?to protect the quality and integrity of ecosystems? in the forest.

CORE's opposition includes concerns around the ?one-day? event being repeated; that it will attract subsequent, unauthorized vehicle use; create noise and reduce property values; pose potential dangers to hikers and animals; result in physical damage to the forest, caused by the event and possible additional and similar events and unauthorized incursions, that could take years to remediate.

Deputy Mayor of Mulmur Township, Janet Horner says her Council is also opposed the "trial.?

?Mulmur Council voted to oppose the trial motorcycle event because of the overwhelming feedback we received from constituents,? says Janet Horner. ?Mulmur citizens are opposed to motorized events in the County forest. It is my feeling that if there is felt to be a need for such events, they would be better located at the property in Amaranth that the County owns for a designated landfill site or other properties that are less environmentally sensitive. Our green environment in the County Forest in Mulmur is important to steward and protect and it is our opinion that our Council has acted in a manner that does so.?

?On behalf of the County of Dufferin,? Warden Darren White thanks all the members of the Forest Committee for ?their hard work on the recreation plan up to this point,? as well as ?members of the public, and community groups who took time to educate themselves and make comments on the draft.?

However, the Warden stressed, ?since the public comment period is still open and the committee has yet to review the comments and make a recommendation, it would be unfair to make a comment on behalf of the County at this time. Once the committee has met and had discussions, I'm sure the proper course of action will be taken, whatever that course may be.?

Pam Hillock Dufferin County Clerk told the Free Press, comments received on the Forest Recreation Plan ?will be reviewed by the Forest Advisory Review Committee at its meeting on April 5th at 7:00 p.m. The agenda will be available on Friday, March 31 and the comments will be part of the package.?

Dufferin County Forest Manager Caroline Mache ?encourages everyone to provide comments on the draft recreational policy and/or the proposal for a trial recreational off-road motorcycle event at the Randwick Tract by March 31.

Documents are available at www.dufferincounty.ca and all comments must be made in writing through the feedback tab on the County website or by email to me at forestmanager@dufferincounty.ca.