

PORT HOPE COUNCIL

GANARASKA MEMBERS' ACTION GROUP

CAROLINE THORNTON

DECEMBER 20TH 2022

BACKGROUND

- Resident adjacent to the Ganaraska Forest (Ganny) for 20 years
- Equestrian member and Patrol Rider for 20 years (Ambassador role)
- Participated in the 2018-2038 process to develop the 2018-2038 approved Forest Management Plan
- One of three Founders of the Ganaraska Members' Action Group in October 2022. Facebook members – over 850, Petition signed by more than 1500 people in ten days
- Spokesperson and media contact for the G –MAG.
- There is a crisis in the Forest!

May 26th 2022

- A sudden and violent windstorm surged across Southern Ontario causing serious damage in multiple locations. One area of the West Forest was wiped out and approx. 600 acres of area was destroyed.
- There was limited damage in some other areas but basically 85% of the Forest was untouched or suffered minor damage. The GRCA staff chose to close 100% of the Forest and no-one was allowed to use the Forest in any part for any reason.
- The staff created an “Operational Recovery Plan” to identify the way they would restore the Forest and reopen the facility to users (who pay an Annual fee) The Forest would reopen on September 30th 2022.

Reality Check

- The GRCA staff claim this is an “Operational tool” and as such, requires no authorization, no accountability, no public engagement, no Board approval and no interaction with User groups and members.
- There are dramatic changes to the approved Management Plan:
 - E.g. Residents in the area are not allowed to walk, bike, hike or ride into the Forest at any point or for any reason.
 - Every person who comes to the Forest MUST come by car!
 - Trees in the area of the Forest Centre will be removed to expand the Parking area.
 - Having all the users in one designated parking area poses serious risks to every member of the Forest.
 - The closed access points create serious issues for emergency vehicles to enter the Forest to assist anyone who might be injured or in need of help.

Reality Check (continued)

- Staff have changed some of the Membership rules. (e.g. age limits)
- The Patrol members have been discontinued.
- All residents adjacent to the Central Forest (the non-motorized section) and throughout the area cannot access the Forest from their own property.
- The Staff are challenging the Right of Way rules which have been in place since the 1940s. This further inhibits access to the Forest.
- The staff have hired contractors to install barriers at multiple entrance points to the Forest.
- No public events are planned, there is no engagement with the Forest members, the residents, or the Community at large.

Consequences

- We contacted a dozen or so Conservation Areas, Recreational Parks and Forested areas and discovered they were using volunteers to help in their recovery and not one site was closed completely for a prolonged period of time. Most of the facilities were up and running within eight weeks.
- The GRCA failed to open the Forest, as promised, on Sept.30th. 6% of the trails were open which left 94% closed to all users.
- The staff repeated two words throughout the ORP document "Close" and "Restrict." Nowhere in the document does the word "Open" appear.
- To this day no opening date has been announced. (Six months post storm) The claim is that the closure is for "Safety reasons" but huge areas of the forest were untouched and are as safe as they were before the storm occurred. The Members want to resume their activities in this very special place.

Current state

- The GRCA Board has failed to meet their mandate through their lack of Governance. There has been no oversight and no accountability for the actions of the staff since May 26th 2022.
- There has been minimal communication and no details of how the Forest will be open for use again.
- There are no plans for or effort to engage the public in the cleanup efforts (other than the Snowmobile Club) or to announce the intended recovery dates. The restrictions imposed on volunteers when they come to help in the forest are making the chance of them contributing almost impossible.
- The members of the Forest have been shut out and ignored. It is time for a major, meaningful change.
- The reputation of the GRCA has been damaged, the Forest has been damaged and the relationship with the Forest Community has been damaged. At a time when outdoor recreation is so critical, a fabulous resource is unavailable and the future of the Forest looks bleak.

Next Steps

- The newly formed GRCA Board must take their Governance role seriously. The rules of process and procedures must be followed.
- The GRCA needs to establish a more formal, frequent and informative Communication strategy for members, residents and the public.
- Offers of help and engagement from the community should be welcomed, encouraged and appreciated.
- There have to be ongoing public interactions and ways for the GRCA to work openly and honestly with the RUC, with residents who own property in this area and with the members of the public who support and enjoy the Forest.