

Horseback riders lose bid for access to DCF Main Tract

By Mike Pickford

What appears to be a longstanding, bitter feud between two different user groups of the Dufferin County Forest reared its head last Thursday as County Council heard from horseback riders who feel hard done by recent changes to the recreational policy for the site.

It was a busy night inside council chambers as people on both sides of the issue filled the gallery, with the horse riders especially vocal as they sought to change a new policy, implemented in May, that the County spent the best part of four years putting together. In that policy, Council agreed to dedicate a 26-kilometre loop of the Main Tract in the Dufferin County Forest to mountain bikers only, much to the chagrin of the local horseback riding community. Eight delegates spoke at the meeting on Thursday, each presenting different thoughts, opinions and points on the new policy.

The main issue most of the horse riders seemed to have is the feeling they're being punished for not involving themselves throughout the four-year period it took to construct the policy. That feeling of injustice is only intensified by the fact that a member of the Forest Operation Review Committee, who helped form recommendations for the policy, is Johnny Yeaman, a leader of one of the local mountain bike clubs set to benefit from the new policy.

Local equestrian Sandra Kendall was one of the many to speak up at the meeting, stating that "you, the County, as custodians, have been listening to a small minority for too long? It can't be that hard to operate multi-use trails." Ms. Kendall noted she had filed a complaint with the provincial Ombudsman, claiming equestrians were "completely ignored" throughout the policy-making process. Stewart Dunkley is another critic of the new policy. In his presentation to Council, he asked why cyclists were made the "big winners," claiming that a multi-use trail system had worked well for decades and didn't need to be changed. He also pointed to direct violations of the County's Property Use Agreement, with several members of the Team Van Go cycling team pictured consuming alcohol on site following numerous rides over the past year.

"It seems that beer is an integral part of this mountain bike group's culture," Mr. Dunkley alleged. "At the Main Tract it's very common to see cyclists on lawn chairs sipping on a beer after a ride. They drink openly? If any term of this agreement is breached by the user then, at the option of the County, this agreement may be terminated immediately."

He continued, "It's time to uphold the County principle and make a good decision. This user agreement should be revoked. I respectfully ask that Council make a motion to direct staff to review the need for separation of the Trail."

Mr. Yeaman was in attendance at the meeting, serving as one of the eight delegations. Once information regarding the drinking on site came to light, County Warden Darren White rounded on the cyclist over the apparent violation.

"There is literature on your website that promotes events that run counter to the rules," Warden White said in reference to the consumption of alcohol and hosting of campfires.

"We can cease to do that," Mr. Yeaman replied.

"I'd suggest you cease to do the practice period," Warden White responded.

Dufferin CAO Sonia Pritchard confirmed that the County would be investigating claims of alcohol consumption and other allegations of misuse and/or violations of the property use agreement. She said that investigation began on Friday (Oct. 13).

Other speakers ? Elaine Wiesner on behalf of the Ontario Trail Riders Association, Pam Coburn of the Ontario Equestrian Federation and Randy Wright of the Chesley Saddle Club ? noted that, as frequent users and investors in the Dufferin County Forest they would at the very least have appreciated the opportunity to have their say during the policy-making process. Instead, as Ms. Kendall and other members asserted, they now feel forgotten about and ignored. Now that the group of riders has some organization, they fear it may be too late to have an influence on the policy.

Those fears were perhaps magnified then when Warden White made it clear he had no desire to reopen the policy and "go down that rabbit hole again" having already spent the best part of four years developing it.

"A lot has been said here tonight about this policy? The truth is, we made sure to put events in multiple newspapers, all over social media and passed information around via word of mouth. The fact that people in other counties or outside of our jurisdiction were not notified, let's be realistic. We do not have an obligation to knock on every door in Ontario and notify people personally. If you feel missed or left out, then I apologize, but this process has evolved over four years," Warden White said.

"We spent a long time developing this, we listened to what everyone had to say throughout the process and we've ended up where we're at now. The policy that is in place is the policy in place right now. I encourage all of you to follow it," he continued.