

Friends of Nellie Lunn host online townhall meeting

By Chris Drost

On Sunday afternoon, Dec. 5, the Friends of Nellie Lunn hosted an online event described as an educational opportunity for those interested in learning more about the potential sale of Nellie Lunn Park by Wollaston council. While the event was initially planned to be a hybrid event with a live component at the Royal Canadian Legion in Coe Hill, and on line on the Zoom platform, concerns over increasing numbers of COVID-19 resulted in the event being entirely moved on line. In all, about 50 people participated in the 90-minute long event. The meeting was professionally moderated by Peter Lennox, a member of the Wollaston community, beginning with a land acknowledgement and speakers from the Friends group, Sheila Currie and JD Fentie. Fentie noted that he has lived in Wollaston since 2000 but his roots are deeper than that. His grandparents have lived here for some time. Currie said her family has been in the community since 1954. In a slide presentation, the timeline for what has happened with Nellie Lunn Park in the past year, was shared, along with a description of how the report for council was prepared. Under the caption, "Why do we care about Nellie Lunn Park?" it was stressed the park represents 96 per cent of the public land assets for recreation in Wollaston and that they are "irreplaceable." It has wetlands to protect, water, wildlife and fish stocks in Urbach Lake that have been added there in recent years to reduce the pressure on nearby Wollaston Lake. The park was described as a low/no carbon recreational opportunity that is supported by provincial legislation. It is also part of the ecologically unique region known as The Land Between. The health and social benefits were also highlighted. These include physical and mental health. Volunteer networks strengthen communities. The park can also be used as an outdoor classroom and the walking trails are especially important in these times as a safe recreational activity and access to nature. Under Economic Benefits, Fentie presented a slide called, "Myths and Misconceptions." These included concerns that council has brought forward in discussions about the possible sale of the park, concerns that the Friends believe they have addressed. Park access "easily accessible by an unopened road allowance. Legal liability "parks have different rules than other municipal infrastructure such as sidewalks. Emergency services to park "They are the same as to any other park. Danger due to hunting "Limited but can easily be addressed. Trespassing "limited but can easily be addressed with signage. Encroachment "minimal and it has been in place for 40 years with no impact. Too costly to rehabilitate and maintain "The township has spent less than \$5,000 on the park in the past 40 years. Council had indicated that proceeds from the sale would go towards a new firehall. The Friends addressed this by stating that there is currently no clear definition of what is needed for a firehall. In fact, council has approved a study to investigate regional fire services. Wollaston may not need one at all or may decide to go in with other communities to have one. They noted that the Fire Services Review of 2017 indicated that the key issue to is to address operation practices of the fire department, not a new building. Under the title, "The Plan to save Nellie Lunn Park," the Friends outlined a plan to have a local organization take on the responsibility for management and improvements to the park in a clearly defined relationship with the township. The plan would be to carry out projects only when available funds are available, meaning there would be minimal cost to the taxpayer. The plans would also include using volunteer labour and where possible, in-kind donations of services and goods. They propose working with experienced local organizations to benefit from their expertise. The Next Steps suggested by the Friends are to have council meet with the park leadership organization that would include representatives from Hastings Destination Trails Inc., the Bancroft Area Stewardship Council and Crowe Valley Conservation. They could work towards updating park plans, obtaining costings, schedules and scope that would ultimately go to council for approval. A number of guest speakers rounded out the program. Cathy Trimble, explained how HDTI could assist the group going forward with its expertise in such areas as trails tourism, risk management, volunteer skill development, legislation, marketing and signage. Mayor Carl Stefanski of Limerick Township, said he was "speaking from the heart." In Limerick, they have set aside \$5,000 per year to spend on McGeachie Conservation Area. "We view this as a benefit to the economy of Limerick as well as for North Hastings," he said. Stefanski continued by saying he wonders why this trail will be sold, for how much, to whom? "There are no guidelines about what [the proceeds from the sale] would be used for." In Limerick Lake Estates, 68 lots have now been sold. Stefanski suggested it would be advisable to have a second trail system in the area for the increase in population. "The gentleman gave the property as a park. The ethics are not there," added Stefanski. Ian Hendry, chair of BASC explained that BASC has offered Mayor Kruger and council the assistance in keeping Nellie Lunn Park as it was intended 40 years ago. He has reached out to the mayor twice. Hendry explained that BASC was instrumental in getting Eagles Nest going. Steve Wilkins, director with BASC, provided more details on BASC and how "the diversity of the directors all bring their expertise to the table." This organization has a long history of helping other groups to get started, the Field Naturalists, NOS/NERDS and Stewards of Bancroft Eagles Nest Park, to name a few. Wilkins explained how

the model used for Eagles Nest, and the relationship between the volunteer Stewards group and the Town of Bancroft, could be used as a model for Nellie Lunn Park, and BASC is willing to help. Fentie explained some of the key findings from the Crowe Valley Conservation report that indicated the park would be suitable for non-motorized trails, but not other types of development such as buildings. June Wells, owner of The Tin House, thanked everyone for their work and then explained her passion for tourism. She tries to share her knowledge of things to do whenever a customer comes through her door. She has written a letter to council explaining how inspired she was when she first came to Wollaston and could see the community and council working together to carry out such things as façade improvements and other efforts. Now, as a voting member of the community, she would like to share her disappointment with the councillors. "The idea of selling Nellie Lunn Park has pushed me over the edge," she said. Wells believes that selling the Park would be the loss of an economic opportunity as well as a health opportunity. She says that if there are others who are willing to come forward to try and make keeping the park work, "isn't it worth a try?" Lonnie Kilbride Reed, said that although she is new to the area, she fell in love with it and opened the Grape and Wedge and also a Bed and Breakfast. "What resonates with me is impression. Whenever a guest comes to stay with us, they need a place to relax and enjoy nature." People find Nellie Lunn Park "to be an easy place to take kids. We have had really good feedback. If you give them the experience they are looking for, they will want to come back," she said. In terms of volunteers, she knows Nellie Lunn Park would not be let down. Angela Finnegan, local educator and parent, provided a short video clip for the meeting that gave a heartfelt explanation of how Nellie Lunn is an important place in the community. She said that her kids and her have used it right up until it closed. As an educator, she has used many of the nearby parks for curriculum programming. "It is important as an educator and as a mom to have a safe natural environment to use," said Finnegan. During the question period, one individual asked about the trespassing complaints. Fentie responded that there are four known complaints. He suggested that better signage in the park would be needed before it reopens to address this concern. Another individual asked about the insurance costs to cover the park. The response was that the costs would be the same as those to cover such things as playgrounds and the arena. Mayor Stefanski explained that all townships are required to carry insurance but if a township is found even one per cent liable, it will have to pay for the entire thing. He says that this is to be addressed with the province at next summer's Association of Municipalities meeting. Information on how to contact the mayor and council about Nellie Lunn, was provided at the end of the presentation. Anyone with questions from the Friends of Nellie Lunn can still send them to nellielunnpark@gmail.com. The response from council of late, according to Fentie, is that it has been "pretty much silence other than restating comments we have dispelled." Someone else commented, "aren't you preaching to the converted," as it appeared that only one council member was on the Zoom meeting and many others were already known supporters of the efforts to save Nellie Lunn. One participant asked Mayor Stefanski if he had any advice for the presentation to council on Dec. 13. He suggested appealing to a sense of compassion to keep Nellie Lunn Park. He also suggested that a potential buyer may be in the wings, Ben Samann, who recently purchased all the former Domtar lands. If this is the case, people may have to pay \$10,000 per year to use the property. Trimble added that there may be others with a similar outlook to the Friends of Nellie Lunn, if it comes down to that. Currie concluded the meeting by saying "this is a significant issue going into an election year."