

SABA Old Rail Trail ribbon cutting ceremony brings out the community



By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The official ribbon cutting ceremony for the opening of the Old Rail Trail in Madawaska happened on June 17 at the Madawaska Recreation Complex. In addition to members of the South Algonquin Business Alliance Angela Pollak, Gabriella Hairabedian and Barney Baker, South Algonquin Township Mayor Ethel LaValley, MPP John Yakabuski and MP Cheryl Gallant were also present for the opening of this new trail.

SABA updated South Algonquin council about this at their meeting on April 5, where they informed council that they'd recently procured investment to rebuild the Old Rail Trail, 45 kilometres along the old OA and PS railway and Hwy 159 south to Spectacle Lake, with a parking lot at the SLBM trailhead. They've done this with a \$400,000 investment and volunteer time from SABA, and it will be bicycle friendly, multi-use, multi-season and accessible. From this rebuild they hope to have improved pride in and public perception of South Algonquin, better access for people with disabilities and more outdoor sport and recreation opportunities.

At the ribbon cutting ceremony on June 17, Pollak thanked everyone for coming to the grand reopening of the trail system.

"It's a multi-level government partnership along with the Eastern Ontario Trails Alliance. We've put \$140,000 into it so far, we've got \$60,000 parking lot coming and we have another \$200,000 coming thanks to the Federal Enabling Accessibility Fund. So thanks to everyone for coming. By the time we're done, it'll be about \$400,000 investment, which is a big deal for a small community like this and it's taken a lot of people, a lot of volunteers to get here. These kinds of projects really require all levels of government working together and we couldn't be more excited, between the private and public partnerships that made it happen we're hoping for good things to come for the community as a result of it," she says.

Gallant said she was thrilled to be there, as she presented a certificate to Hairabedian commemorating the reopening of the trail, and said she remembered when they opened up the bridge over the Madawaska River that makes up part of the new trail.

"It brings back many good memories and I'm sure we'll have some more today," she says.

Yakabuski said there had been a lot of earth-shaking events and real changes in the area over the past few years.

"As I said earlier, the west side of [Algonquin] Park had a 60-year head start on us but people are realizing what an absolute gem we

have east of Algonquin. People are now saying we need to take advantage of that. The local economies benefit tremendously, the local people there'll be jobs. These are some of the best parts of Ontario and Canada right here, so I want to thank everybody who continues to look forward, who look for the possibilities as we head into the future. You're already starting to do something and I see great things down the road as well, or down the trail!?" he says.

LaValley said that on behalf of South Algonquin Township, she thanked everyone for coming, and thanked Four Corners Algonquin and all the SABA volunteers for stepping up and making the new trails a reality.

"This is the beginning of a process. We will continue to all work together to make South Algonquin more welcoming for people to come here. As John [Yakubski] said, west of Algonquin is very popular but also very busy so that's a bonus for us. So, thanks very much and I'm honoured to be here on behalf of South Algonquin," she says.

Pollak then thanked all the attendees again and invited them to go explore the newly opened trail, which they did.

Pollak told Bancroft This Week on June 18 that the entire weekend was dedicated to showcasing South Algonquin and the stories of the businesses and people who live there, and it was held on the same weekend as their first ever South Algonquin Digital Content Creator Camp, where they had 15 social media influencers from across Ontario, Quebec and as far south as Maine visiting to learn more about South Algonquin Township.

"The ribbon cutting turnout was excellent and we had so many positive comments from our content creators about the wonderful sense of community in action here in South Algonquin. I was especially pleased to see representatives from all three levels of government and from the South Algonquin Business Alliance attending because projects of this size require public-private collaborations with all levels working together cooperatively to achieve a common good. Eastern Ontario Trails Alliance has been a steadfast partner as well. We anticipate that all of South Algonquin will feel the ongoing benefit of this investment," she says. "With great weather and a high level of enthusiasm from both inside and outside the community, what more could we ask for really?"