

Wollaston council visits Bear Ridge Campground



By Jim Eadie

Business development is always a priority for municipal governments, but getting there can be an interesting and complex process, as was evident at the Oct. 27 meeting of Wollaston Township council.

In 2013 Jay and Traci Morrison purchased what is now Bear Ridge Campground and Cottages on The Ridge Road south of the hamlet of Coe Hill and have been working towards improvement, and expansion of the business.

This is a 50-acre property with 25 original campsites.

"When we bought the property, the only septic system was 40 gallon drums and a few pipes," said Morrison.

Since that time, a brand new Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change approved septic treatment system is being installed which would safely accommodate more than 100 campsites on the property.

However, expanding to 100 sites has become the complicated part.

At their March 10 meeting, Wollaston council met to consider proposed zoning amendments to the campground's request for expansion to 100 sites.

At that time a group of nearby and adjacent landowners expressed their respect for the new owner, but concerns about traffic problems, crowding, and the impact on Wollaston Lake.

"This might be the most important decision we make as a council," said Reeve Graham Blair at the time.

"We want this to go forward, but we want to get it right the first time."

Since that time, a portion of The Ridge Road has been designated a community safety zone by council with a reduced speed limit, and new markings have been painted on the roadway.

"Traffic calming is on our radar for that road," said Blair at the time.

Of concern to Hastings County planning department and council was the amount of beach area available for use by that number of new campers.

According to the planning department, their guideline is two metres of usable shore for each campsite.

By that measure, Bear Ridge fell short of that number, and it was recommended that a swimming pool be installed to take the pressure off the beach.

After considerable hand wringing, council unanimously agreed that the owner must install a pool once the campsites developed exceed 50.

On Oct. 27, council invited representatives from Hastings County planning and the Crowe Valley Conservation Authority to attend their meeting along with the Morrisons who were asking for a possible amendment to the bylaw that required a pool be installed at 50 campsites: either by increasing that number or removing the requirement.

Paul Walsh of Hastings County planning department agreed that the formula for determining the capacity of the waterfront was not

cast in stone, but that a waterfront can support boating, fishing, swimming and relaxation in larger measures than most other recreational activities.

He also noted that waterfront by their definition does not include water features such as ponds and creeks. "There has to be significant recreational value in the park," he said.

Morrison was quick to differentiate their park as different from the usual vision of a campground.

"We are attracting people that are not going to the other campgrounds," he said.

Sharlene Richardson [Crowe Valley Conservation Authority] was in last week, and she thinks what we are doing is quite unique.

We attract a different crowd? we are a new park, and they know we don't have a pool. They are looking for trails, and healthy exercise. They are not looking for a pool. A pool is not a financial burden to us, but I would rather put money into other things.?

Morrison noted their extensive hiking trails, habitat work, and special programs to bring kids back to nature.

"No one else is doing it," he said.

Bear Ridge also has a string of ponds and a creek that provide many hours of investigation, frog catching and fishing for children that he notes is a more popular and time consuming activity in their park.

Most of the new campsites are a long way and a difficult walk from the beach area, and attract people not interested in the beach.

"It is best to have a pool," said Walsh. "Maybe it would be best to pick a different number? that is my first inkling.?"

"Maybe a site visit is in order?" asked Councillor Marilyn Brickles.

Council adjourned, and members and delegations present drove to Bear Ridge Campground and Cottages where they toured the property with the owners.

At 11 a.m., when council returned to council chambers, and continued with their meeting, the tone seemed to have changed a bit.

"Any amendment must be definitive," Walsh reminded council.

"It must not contain any future maybes. I am just worried about recreational capacity. I suggest an amendment to require a report on the recreational facilities and amenities to justify change up to 75 sites before a pool. A pool is one example of active and passive activity. A good acceptable recreational plan that meets those expectations would be required to exclude a pool.?"

"A visit to the camp has changed my mind," said Brickles. "As long as they have a strong plan.?"

Council voted unanimously to defer the discussion until the Morrises provide a recreational plan to council for consideration, as proposed by Walsh.

"I think a pool could look goofy there?" said Councillor Bob Ireland. "Where would you stick it, and make it fit in??"