

Wollaston votes to have Nellie Lunn property appraised

By Chris Drost

There were three delegations to Wollaston council on the afternoon of Dec. 20 concerning the proposed sale of Nellie Lunn Park. Council had been planned for the week prior but electrical outages due to the recent storm prompted the delay. Following the presentations council voted to obtain an appraisal and real estate value of the property, with only Mayor Lynn Kruger and Deputy Mayor Darlene Colton in opposition.

The first presenters were Sheila Currie and JD Fentie representing the Friends of Nellie Lunn Park. The business case for keeping Nellie Lunn Park had been submitted to council as requested on Nov. 9 and this was the first opportunity to address it with council and answer any questions the council may have had. Following the main part of the presentation which contained highlights of the report, Fentie suggested that the next steps would be to create a park leadership team to work in cooperation with council. He said they would expect clearly documented reasons for the decision if council rejects the report and if they do, it would be doing a disservice to those who prepared it. At the very least he said there should be first right of refusal to any organization willing to operate it as a park.

The presentation was cut short by the 15-minute limit set by council for all delegations. "We asked you to come up with a plan three months ago. I don't see this as a plan. I still have serious reservations about what you have presented," said Councillor Jeff Swartman. Fentie responded that you develop a broad plan then get into the detail. "Once we have agreement to proceed from council we can get into the detail of MOUs etc.," explained Fentie. He continued by saying that what he is asking council to do is agree in principle the way the park would be run. First, he asked that council agree that Nellie Lunn Park will exist, then they can approach other partnering groups and finalize support, then they can line up the project financing.

"The only solution I see is signage and some people ignore this. There needs to be more solutions than signs," said Mayor Lynn Kruger. Fentie asked if she was suggesting that "we sell the park because people don't read signs"? The mayor responded that every time an OPP gets called, Wollaston gets charged and so they need other solutions.

Councillor Michael Fuerth informed council that whether the park is sold or not, the unopened road allowance can never be sold or closed. He suggested it would be better for the municipality to keep the park and provide better demarcation.

"There is only so far an organization can go without approval of the landowner. It is not realistic to think it [a Memorandum of Understanding] could be created without it," Currie explained that the Friends of Nellie Lunn Park are trying to bring the partners together so once council gives word, they will be ready to go ahead. Currie mentioned Ontario Trillium Foundation funding that was available earlier in the fall that would have been perfect for the project had council been on board.

Next up was Fred Cox, representing The Adjoining Landowners to the Nellie Lunn property. "We have made our issues very clear to council in the past with regards to the trespass on our properties resulting from the use of the Nellie Lunn property," said Cox in a letter addressed to council that was included with his request for the delegation.

Cox continued by stressing that in the opinion of the adjoining landowners, "that the viability of keeping Nellie Lunn open would be a huge financial burden to the township presently and in the future." He noted that other infrastructure projects in the township are of more importance, specifically, the fire hall, waste disposal site and the library. According to Cox, the trespassing needs to stop and the sale of the property would be one way of achieving that goal. "This would be more cost effective than to keep pouring money into something that has no quantifiable return to the community," his continued. The "extreme expense" of addressing the continued use of the unopened road allowance was also cited as a major issue. His presentation concluded by wishing council all the best in making these tough decisions and "at the end of the day, may they do the right thing for the ratepayers of Wollaston Township." Following Cox's presentation, Deputy Mayor Colton indicated that the Friends of Nellie Lunn Park say there are only two adjacent land owners. "How many are there," she asked Cox. He replied that there are four, with eight lots having connections

to Nellie Lunn. He owns property on both sides of the unopened road allowance.

Cathy Trimble, representing Hastings Destination Trails Inc. gave a Powerpoint presentation entitled, 'It's all about collaboration.' She referred to the project that resulted in 18 kilometres of trails being refurbished and how it has excited local communities. She shared HDTI's vision for developing a sustainable and unique network of quality trails in Hastings County. In the letter requesting the delegation it was stated that 'Nellie Lunn is a key asset in the township portfolio and any decision to sell it must be based in a clear and immediate danger/need/benefits basis.' Trimble offered HDTI to be part of the process in ensuring all avenues are explored and discussed, and their experience and expertise shared with the township.

Following the main part of her presentation, Trimble offered some possible next steps for council. They included holding off on the sale for 18-24 months, create a committee of council to oversee the process, approve a final plan for Nellie Lunn Park, create a MOU with HDTI and develop collaborative partnerships.

Deputy Mayor Colton asked Trimble how much time HDTI would put into this project. Trimble responded that once they had determined funding sources, she could give a better idea of all the volunteer time. Colton questioned whether the park would have to be closed for 18-24 months. Trimble explained that it would not. They could go forward with plans as grants, potentially federal ones, become available.

In terms of maintenance of the park, Trimble added that the working group would address ongoing maintenance. 'Parks are developed to be more sustainable so they have minimal maintenance,' she said. Trimble offered the example of Eagles Nest where the municipality does some maintenance but volunteers with the Stewards of Eagles Nest Park also do some too during regular work bees. 'As a landowner you would have some responsible to maintain it but it doesn't have to have a huge cost,' said Trimble.

Deputy Mayor Colton asked about accessibility as information received that day indicated that the province would like to make more outdoor spaces fully accessible. 'The land has to tell you what it is going to be,' replied Trimble. Mayor Kruger responded that the question of accessibility impacts their decision whether or not to keep the park. 'Can it be accessed by everyone,' she asked.

'Can you honestly draw a comparison between Nellie Lunn and Eagles Nest,' asked Councillor Jeff Swartman. Trimble explained that only the Hawkwatch trail on Eagle's Nest was developed as an accessible trail. 'Every park comes into its own,' she said.

Finally, Councillor Jeff Swartman put forward a resolution that directed staff to obtain an official appraisal and real estate value of the Nellie Lunn property, seconded by Councillor Michael Fuerth. 'This is an important question so let's get this answer first,' said Councillor Swartman. Deputy Mayor Darlene Colton questioned the cost and time. 'I don't think we need it appraised if it is going up for sale,' she said. Councillor Swartman said he did not agree. 'It is important to know the assessed value. If it is only \$50,000 maybe we should keep it,' he responded. 'It doesn't matter what it is valued at, it is only what someone is willing to pay,' replied Deputy Mayor Colton.

After some discussion about potential cost for the appraisal, Councillor Michael Fuerth indicated the importance of obtaining an appraisal from a qualified appraiser. 'I don't see the rush,' he said.

'Let's just vote,' added Councillor Jay Morrison.

In a recorded vote, all voted in favour of obtaining the appraisal with the exception of Mayor Lynn Kruger and Deputy Mayor Darlene Colton, who opposed.