

Forest Valley Trails Working Group (FVTWG) Report, October 22, 2018  
**PROTECTION, SUSTAINABILITY AND MAINTENANCE OF THE CHAPEL HILL NORTH FOREST AND ITS TRAILS**  
**Public Feedback on the FVTWG Report**  
**Summary Report on Online Submissions and Public Information Meeting**  
**Provided to CHNCA May 2019**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Following the **Chapel Hill North Community Association's (CHNCA)** October 28, 2018 online release of the **Forest Valley Trails Working Group (FVTWG)** Report, two **Chapel Hill North (CHN)** community initiatives were launched to enable public participation and feedback: i) a public information meeting held at the Orleans Library on November 5, 2018, and ii) an invitation to submit written feedback comments to a special online CHNCA mailbox. Community feedback and consultations are important.

### **Appreciation and Thanks**

The CHNCA and FVTWG wish to sincerely thank the many respondents who read the FVTWG report, provided written submissions and attended the public meeting to share their comments and questions and hear from the FVTWG authors. All feedback comments are appreciated and valued.

There were 52 participants at the public meeting who posed 21 questions, and 32 thoughtful written submissions sent to the online mailbox. Chapel Hill North residents accounted for 69% of the public meeting participants and made 59% of the online submissions. *[Nota: some participants and respondents did not provide residency information, thus are not reflected in the percentages].* All feedback comments, questions and answers were captured. Names of the respondents have not been released for privacy reasons. These public feedback comments and the original FVTWG Report of October 22, 2018 will be available on the website: [www.chapel-hill-north-forest-trails.ca](http://www.chapel-hill-north-forest-trails.ca)

## **WHO WE ARE**

### **CHNCA**

In mid-2017, the Chapel Hill North Community Association established the FVTWG, an *ad hoc* working group composed of residents of CHN who responded to a community request for volunteers. On October 28, 2018, CHNCA released the FVTWG's report to the public on its online Facebook and Blogspot sites. Over the life of the FVTWG, the CHNCA played a facilitating role, e.g. ensuring FVTWG updates on the agenda of CHNCA meetings; supporting the FVTWG; publicizing the report; organizing the public information meeting; providing an online CHNCA mailbox to gather public feedback comments; and recording all feedback.

### **FVTWG**

The FVTWG undertook to identify key priorities as well as practical and constructive approaches for ensuring the integrity and maintenances of the forest trails for all to enjoy. The FVTWG aimed to provide a portrait of what exists now to better understand the interests and concerns of CHN community and users, the authorities and mandate of the landowners (NCC and City of Ottawa), and the limitations and responsibilities in relation to the Environmental Protection (EP) designation and related sustainability requirements of the CHN Forest. A key focus of the FVTWG report was determining the appropriate usage and maintenance priorities for this valuable forest area and identifying objectives and recommended actions for addressing them. Prescriptive measures and timelines were avoided to enable the CHN community an opportunity to study the options and determine an appropriate way forward.

## **PUBLIC FEEDBACK RESULTS**

### **FVTWG Report**

Respondents appreciated the opportunity to make written comments on the FVTWG report and receive clarifications from FVTWG members at the public information meeting. There was recognition that the significant effort invested in the report is a benefit to the Orleans community. The submissions confirmed that residents value and want to maintain a healthy CHN Forest as an important part of the community.

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Some respondents indicated that the report was lengthy and somewhat repetitive; others supported the depth and detail, and some questioned whether the report's research sources were adequate. The report was structured with: a) a combination of short overview chapters, e.g. executive summary, conclusions, maps and photographs, and summary annexes; and b) sections with greater coverage of specific topics and reference sources, e.g. NCC, City of Ottawa and provincial policies and plans, expert views, FVTWG assessments, footnotes, bibliography and glossary of terms. The aim of the FVTWG was to lay out the priorities based on the research conducted and then move forward with community members in the priority areas deemed appropriate and feasible.

In general, respondents focused on the parts of the report that mattered most to themselves – their interests and concerns – as well as their passions and what should be given high priority. There are interesting similarities, common themes, values and views expressed. As well, there are expressions of divergent views and positions. What was most evident is that people care, some very deeply, about the forest and its trails, what it means to them, how it is used and why it needs to be treated with respect for continued enjoyment of users and the community.

Overall, there was positive feedback of the FVTWG report, its research and assessments. Three respondents held a generally negative view of the report and two perceived there was bias within the FVTWG. One respondent felt that the report did not address the immediate needs of the community. There were concerns that the report's recommendations were exclusionary in nature. Some written comments may have been due to a misunderstanding of certain points in the report. A neighbouring Innes Ward community association made a thoughtful submission based on consultations with its residents.

There was good support for the FVTWG's recommended *Option A - Key Priorities with Community Engagement*. Those who provided a preferred option mentioned Option A.

## **ISSUES IDENTIFIED**

### **Community Awareness**

Appreciation was noted by some respondents for the public feedback opportunities, as well as the clarifications and additional information provided at the public information meeting.

### **Environmental Protection**

Environmental protection and sustainability of the CHN Forest was identified as fundamental and a high priority by 31% of the respondents, supporting Priority 1 Environmental Protection. One comment noted that "the first step in solving a problem is recognizing there is one." Respondents echoed concerns raised in the report regarding ongoing degradation of the CHN Forest associated with unofficial and unmanaged trails and alterations of the forest, and were concerned that it will have consequences in terms of user experience and environmental impact. There were several references to the more sensitive City-owned section of forest, and mention of the petition signed by 633 CHN residents highlighting similar concerns about the well-being of the forest.

We heard that residents value both nature and recreation and want their children to enjoy the forest as they did. In this sense, sustainability of forests and recreational uses are consistent with family values.

Respondents noted the environmental priority given to the CHN Forest and that the City area studied by the FVTWG was accorded the third highest value of Ottawa's 187 priority urban natural areas. Some noted the City's new Urban Forest Management Plan and the NCC's role in Greenbelt protection and sustainability. These comments are an interesting parallel to the high personal value residents have for the CHN Forest.

There were some differing views on whether the higher good of an urban natural area should take priority over an individual's recreational interests. Observations were made that continued enjoyment of trails is dependent on a healthy and protected forest and responsible trail management; these must be considered together. The FVTWG

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report aims to help the community, landowners and decision makers find common ground where values and objectives can co-exist.

### **Proximity to the CHN Forest**

CHN residents shared their views that they have a vested interest in the CHN Forest for reasons such as health, family activities, recreation, appreciation of natural areas, livability of the neighbourhood, concern for environmental sustainability, protection of the Greenbelt, ease of access and property values. On the other hand, some non-residents of CHN expressed concern that the CHN's forest area is public land owned by the NCC and City of Ottawa thus of interest to all and should be available for all users.

### **Management of the CHN Forest and Trails**

Some feedback called upon the City and NCC landowners to become more actively involved in management of the CHN Forest, and for timely consultations with the CHN community. There were recommendations for an important preliminary step by landowners – the conduct of baseline environmental and sustainability reviews in accordance with the legal requirements and best management practices for responsible trail management. One comment noted the distinction between sustainability of a trail and sustainability of the environment where the trail is located (i.e. an EP forest).

Several residents of a west-end city ward flagged concerns regarding mountain biking experiences over the past two years in their small urban forest. They exhorted CHN to be wary of trail management by organizations that may not have forest sustainability for compact urban natural areas like CHN Forest as a priority for ongoing management.

There were some comments that forest trail management is a shared responsibility, as well as an opportunity for CHN residents and users to get involved and have an impact on City and NCC decisions about the future of CHN's highly valued natural asset. *Nota:* The NCC has recently announced their commitment to drafting a Forest Strategy together with the cities of Ottawa and Gatineau to protect and manage greenspaces. Governments alone cannot sustain urban natural areas such as forests; they count on community associations, residents, users, experts and others.

### **Public Education and Awareness**

Feedback has highlighted the need for public education and awareness of CHN's environmental protected (EP) forest as soon as possible, as well as a better understanding of its topography, flora and fauna. A number of respondents commented that more accessible, visible and legible signage and user protocols relevant to the CHN Forest would improve awareness and understanding of the forest's unique characteristics.

The problem of dogs off-leash was raised by respondents in terms of the safety of people especially children, other dogs, wildlife, habitats and forest integrity noting that dogs are allowed in the CHN Forest but must be on leash at all times and must always be under the control of their handler. Residents have observed that handlers are not always aware of their dog's location and where it poops. One respondent commented that the forest is not a toilet for pets, and that dog feces is sometimes left in the forest, some in plastic poop bags. Another resident referred to negative impacts of dogs being off-leash in a forest. There is fear of pack behaviour, especially near children and older adults, when groups of dog handlers walk their dogs off-leash or when an individual dog handler has multiple dogs off-leash.

One respondent aptly concluded "... although there will always be some users who don't care about the impact of their actions, there are many more users who would likely change their behaviour if they were better informed about how their actions affect others and can damage the forest that we all enjoy so much. These may be cyclists who don't see the ruts that their bikes make or realize that riding by rapidly startles walkers. These may be dog owners who have no idea that their loose dog may badly frighten someone else on the trail. . . A more productive approach to resolving such trail use issues and providing better protection of the forest would be to focus on educating trail users so that they recognize the protected status of the forest, the consequences of their actions, and can make a choice to

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change their behaviour. It is especially important to start educating children about responsible trail usage. . . Providing users of the trails with a better understanding of the impact of their actions and information about this urban gem will go a long way towards improving the protection of this beautiful area, improving user behaviour, and reducing user conflicts.”

**Appropriate Use**

Appropriate behaviour is interpreted in relation to a variety of factors. Signage, public education and awareness are important ways to affect appropriate behaviour and use of the forest. Some other contributing factors mentioned in the feedback are peer pressure, self-policing, community involvement, promotion and enforcement. Evidence of degradation has its own impacts, and evidence of adverse impact has already been studied and advice given about remedial and mitigating actions, as well as preventative measures.

There were comments about Orleans being an expanding east end community of a large city with growth and development on the rise, contributing to increased pressure on the NCC Greenbelt and the City’s natural areas. CHN is impacted as it is situated on the environmentally protected escarpment with sensitive natural features, e.g. urban forests, creeks, ravines, steep slopes, wet areas and open greenspaces. Respondents noted that times have changed since CHN was built; new policies and approaches have been approved (e.g. Ottawa’s Urban Forest Management Plan and the NCC’s 50-year Plan for Canada’s Capital) and higher priority accorded to decisions affecting climate change and valuable “green infrastructure” assets such as urban forests.

Some comments referred to bad, inconsiderate or inappropriate behaviour that has contributed to degradation of the integrity and natural features of CHN Forest. Many cited that such behaviour is often a consequence of lack of awareness, education and outreach. These points support Priority 5 Public Education and Awareness.

Numerous comments stress the expectation that appropriate use not be solely determined based on interest groups but on environmental protection requirements, long-term sustainability, and other measures that would serve the future of the CHN Forest, rather than current interests. Respondents indicated an understanding that some areas are not necessarily appropriate for certain uses (e.g. biking, dog-walking and pedestrians). Examples were given of natural areas and parks where this policy has already been put into effect and informal and unsustainable trails closed and returned to their natural state or integrated into official trails.

Respondents made suggestions about good user behaviours based on best management practices and codes of conduct elsewhere that are beneficial and have mitigated or avoided adverse impacts for forests, ravines and natural area trails. Respondents are aware of the EP status of the CHN Forest and want the City and NCC to become involved in defining appropriate use and the conduct of expert reviews before trail design, management and maintenance are determined.

**Trail Users and Activities**

While the FVTWG report was careful not to exclude mountain bikers or others as users of the CHN Forest, it did identify activities that may be incompatible. The objectives of the FVTWG focused on identifying solutions for responsible trail management which would allow ongoing maintenance of CHN’s unique greenspace into the future, and recognizing the importance of accommodating multiple users in a way which is compatible to allow continued enjoyment of this natural area and ensure continued maintenance of its ecological integrity. Everyone is welcome, but activities and usage which are incompatible with these objectives are not.

Some respondents commented that larger natural areas are available elsewhere in Ottawa and have better trail terrain for mountain biking. The City’s section of the CHN Forest has been described as a compact area (2 ha.) with a dense network of inter-connecting trails displaying an absence of logic and inconsistent standards that are not well configured for walking and that appear to have evolved primarily from mountain biking use.

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It has been noted that a little damage in a large area is not the end of the forest, but the same amount of damage in a small area like CHN Forest might have significant adverse impact. Respondents observed that online trail websites exist that advertise the CHN Forest area as a destination for mountain biking. There were comments about the safety of users and pets when trails are used by both pedestrian and bikers, and concern that this could worsen with an increase in volume of users. Some comments described evidence of biking in wet and sensitive areas such as ravines, slopes, ridges and creeks, causing ruts, soil displacement and new trails. Others mentioned unsanctioned and unsafe bridges, mountain bike structures and terrain alterations causing damage to natural features, e.g. tree roots and creeks, with an impact on flora and fauna.

One respondent indicated that the mountain biking community is underserved within the region's greenspaces and noted the limited number of trail systems where mountain biking is permitted, thus concluding that mountain biking should be allowed in CHN Forest. Other mountain bikers raised concerns about being excluded from CHN trails and felt that all users should be welcome. Some noted that as long-time mountain bikers, they follow good trail behaviour and are respectful to other users. Others recognized that certain sections of CHN Forest may not be appropriate for biking and that other greenspaces would better serve these users.

A few respondents recommended that the determination of trail usage be part of a baseline review of the forest's environmental and long-term sustainability. Best practices of other urban and rural forests were mentioned where allowable uses have been designated for certain areas and conditions. A similar recommendation was put forward by City officials after the September 2017 forest walkabout. We heard that not all trails are necessarily suited to all uses all the time.

#### **Trail Access, Parking and Traffic**

Seven CHN residents of Valley Field Cres. made comments about the trail access point at Forest Glen parkette (zoned O1-Open Space with children's play structures) indicating that they were under the impression that the FVTWG report was saying that this access point would be restricted or closed, thus affecting their family, enjoyment of the forest, and property values. A respondent identified where the City's 2003 urban natural area study had noted a potential serious concern at Forestglen Park related to the impact of mountain bikes, as well as management action needed to rationalize and stabilize paths at the forest entrance.

Another resident commented that bathrooms are not necessary at any access point. One respondent showed support for environmental stewardship and noted that they had not experienced parking congestion on Valley Field Cres. A neighbouring community association recommended addressing concerns of adjacent and close residents to the forest property, citing increased traffic and parking issues.

#### **Next Steps**

One respondent recommended focusing on one small non-contentious priority action that is limited in scope. From there, further actions could be considered in time by the community to the extent that there are viable justifications for doing so, and that public confidence and support has been sought and secured. A number of respondents provided recommendations on going forward. There was also mention of the important role of our Innes Ward Councillor and consultations with neighbouring community associations on the future of the forest and its trails. Respondents referred to consultations with the City and NCC, and participation by forest users. A regularly scheduled community volunteer trail maintenance program was also suggested, and assistance volunteered.

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**CONCLUSIONS**

CHN residents and others benefitted from public feedback initiatives on the FVTWG report. This resulted in increased awareness and understanding about the CHN EP-zoned forest and its trails, and the policy framework that supports this sensitive urban nature area.

The CHN Forest and trails are in the public eye for their beauty, environmental and climate change value and contributions to increased livability of the community, after more than 40 years of largely being unmanaged by the City and NCC. The maintenance of the CHN Forest is a long-term goal, not a one-time fix. The FVTWG has tried to identify an incremental approach based on priorities; one that is workable and not overwhelming.

Any approach for moving forward on trail maintenance must also give due recognition to the City and NCC landowners and their obligations and objectives at the federal, provincial and municipal levels. Establishing a sound land use and environmental base of knowledge before making long-term changes to CHN's protected forest and sensitive ecosystems and habitats was generally understood to be a proactive and preventative measure, not a punitive one, that will ensure positive benefits for residents and users in the long run. Ultimately, it must make sense to the greatest number of residents.

There are definite opportunities for reorganization and management of the trail network from its present informal situation to official trails supported by informative signage and ease of access. Depending on baseline reviews, this may involve the closing or repositioning of trails, and remedial actions to mitigate and prevent adverse impacts such as unsanctioned and unsafe structures, terrain alterations and unsustainable trail layout. Consultation with City and NCC landowners and community members is a necessary part of these next steps.

Overall, respondents expressed a willingness to work cooperatively and collaboratively for the way forward to ensure continued enjoyment of the CHN Forest, and particularly to engage and collaborate with the City of Ottawa and the National Capital Commission on some of the more pressing matters of concern to residents.

Prepared by the Forest Valley Trails Working Group

Related Documents:

- ❖ FVTWG Report October 22, 2018 (105 pages)
- ❖ Public Feedback - Public Information Meeting held November 5, 2018
  - Slide Presentation (25 slides)
  - Report on Public Information Meeting (12 pages)
- ❖ Public Feedback - Report on Online Comments received October-December 2018 (45 pages)
- ❖ Public Feedback - Highlights Presented at CHNCA AGM, May 28, 2019 (1 page)

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