

# localnews

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## LIVING

# What do we value most?

## The choices: an (arguably) slightly faster drive or nature-rich urban community

*"Who are the next generation of urban conservationists? Where is their sense of ownership with the natural world? Where is their sense of Canadian identity going to come from? We have a tradition in Canada of being tied to the land, and we are losing that. An entire generation is losing it."*

**Witness to The Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development (Parliament of Canada - April, 2013)**

Peterborough City Council will soon have a decision to make. Will it give the green light to the AECOM consultants' draft recommendation that building a road along the Parkway corridor is Peterborough's best option to reduce future traffic congestion (maybe in 2031)?

In the north, the Parkway right-of-way runs from the corner of Fairbairn St. and Highland Rd., crosses both Chemong Rd. and Hilliard St. and then ties into Cumberland Ave. The southern section would extend from Sherbrooke St. at Medical Drive to Clonsilla Ave., but was not recommended in last year's Comprehensive Transportation Plan. Fortunately, the southern route has been slightly modified in order to avoid Byersville Creek, woodlots and a nearby water reservoir. The northern corridor, however, would essentially be destroyed as a serene, biodiverse ribbon of natural habitat for walking, biking and enjoying nature.



**DREW MONKMAN**

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

In the 25 years that I have been arguing for the permanent designation of the Parkway corridor as a linear park, Canada has become an increasingly urban country. According to the Parliamentary committee quoted above in their report Urban Conservation Practices In Canada, approximately 80% of the Canadian population now lives in urban areas, and that number is expected to increase to 90% by the year 2050. The report then goes on to say that "within cities, and elsewhere in Canada, children are spending less time outside in unstructured play. Fewer Canadians than ever before are visiting national parks, and those who do visit them are older, mature adults. Overall, Canadians now spend approximately 95% of their time indoors."

In light of these frightening trends, the pockets and corridors of green space that remain in our cities are more important than ever. If we are not engaging with the natural world by residing in the country, we will need to do so within the urban areas where we live. If urban green spaces and natural areas are not protected and made welcoming to the public, our disconnection from nature will only become worse - with all of the negative impacts for the future of conservation and our health that that entails.

### NATURAL FEATURES OF THE PARKWAY CORRIDOR

I think it's important for readers to get a sense of what stands to be lost, should the corridor become a road.

- The Parkway corridor is the largest and most significant natural habitat and open space in the north end of Peterborough, west of the Otonabee River and east of Jackson Creek and one of the largest areas of green space in the City. It connects with nearby diverse natural areas, such as Bear's Creek Woods and Jackson Creek.

- Because there are no streets immediately alongside the corridor, it is quieter and less subject to disturbances than many other pockets of green space in the city. The first thing you notice when you walk or bike here is how serene and restorative it is. The many trees and shrubs also reduce the concentrations of particulate pollution and, through transpiration of water, make the air cooler than surrounding areas. This is especially important as climate change will bring increasingly hot, humid summers.

- The Parkway route serves as an important wildlife corridor, along which wildlife can traverse a large swath of the city. It offers valuable habitat to a plethora of species. Every spring and fall, large numbers of migrants can be found, including warblers, flycatchers, waxwings and sparrows. Every winter, dozens of American robins are a common sight along the Hilliard to Cumberland section, thanks to the large



DREW MONKMAN photos

The green belt that might become the Parkway route looking south from Cumberland Ave. (top), at Fairbairn St. and Highland Rd. (above) and at Hilliard St. and Cumberland.

amount of wild grape. Barred owls often turn up in the adjacent woods in this section and deer and fox are a regular sight. The small wetland in the Chemong to Hilliard segment is home to various frog species as well as marsh birds such as common yellowthroats.

### COMPELLING STORIES

- I often hear compelling stories from people who walk, bike or live along the corridor. Last June, Greg McLeod emailed me. "I just had the most wonderful experience. Tonight, at about 9:30 p.m., I decided to walk the Parkway Trail home from Chemong Road. I ended up walking all the way to Hilliard Street and back because of the most amazing show of fireflies I have ever seen. There were well over 500, but I really want to say over a thousand!" In April of 2011, Don Finigan shared similar sentiments. "Along the Parkway Trail at the water retention pond just east of Wal-Mart, I observed 3 male mallards verbally harassing a red fox as it patrolled the shore line. The fowl just stayed out of reach of any danger by moving to deeper water when the fox stopped to face them. About 15 minutes later on the same trail but between Chemong and Fairbairn, I was treated to hundreds of bohemian waxwings."

Don't believe for a minute that simply putting a trail along the new road will somehow mitigate all of the damage that will be done. Before the Medical Drive section of the Parkway was built, all kinds of people walked and biked that trail. It, too, was a quite, restorative place to walk, exercise and enjoy nature. Medical Drive is now a treeless, asphalt and concrete chasm and the sidewalk is almost always empty. As the Friends of Peterborough Trails website notes, no one wants to walk or bike alongside a noisy, hot, smelly, natureless road.

### ATTRACTED OUTSIDE

Green space encourages people to get outside, to walk instead of drive, to interact with each other and with the natural world around them. In the process, people develop a sense of human community as well as a greater sense of the bioregion in which they live. Easily accessible green space also leads to multiple personal health benefits, including reduced stress levels and reduced crime. According to a study released this week from the University of Exeter, "parks, gardens and green space in urban areas can improve the well-being and quality of life of people living there." The researchers examined data from more than 5,000 UK households and 10,000 adults between 1991 and 2008 as they moved house around the country. They asked participants to

report on their own psychological health during that time to estimate the "green space effect". Individuals reported less mental distress and higher life satisfaction when they were living in greener areas. This was true even after the researchers accounted for changes over time in participants' income,

employment, marital status, physical health and housing type. In other words, people are happier and less stressed when living in urban areas with greater amounts of green space.

### GOOD FOR CHILDREN

Another strong argument for protect-

ing the corridor as a linear park is its proximity to neighbourhoods brimming with children and to four different schools. For many years while teaching at Edmison Heights Public School, the Parkway corridor was a favourite destination of mine to take my class for nearby walks and hands-on science lessons. Green space and natural areas are beneficial to children for other reasons, as well. Not only do they offer the opportunity for unstructured, creative, outdoor play, but there is considerable research to show that aggression, bullying and vandalism rates all drop when children have green space in which to play. At the same time, attention spans are lengthened. For some in our community without the resources for cottages, camps or cars, it may be the only place for them to encounter nature.

### FASTER OR GREENER?

In the final analysis, it comes down to a choice between the value of an arguably slightly faster commute time in 2031 or a greener, more nature-rich urban community. What kind of legacy do we want to leave our children? What are our priorities? If you believe in forever protecting the Parkway Corridor as a linear park, please let your councillor know. As far as an alternative route for moving traffic across the north part of the City, my personal preference would be what the consultants refer to as Alternative 2 (Fairbairn/3rd Line). This route makes even more sense given the many fewer residences affected and huge Lily Lake housing development that may soon be a reality.

To conclude, the parliamentary report on Urban Conservation Practices in Canada says it best: "As Canadian society is becoming increasingly urbanized, the importance of green spaces in urban centres is also increasing; for many people, these areas represent their best or only opportunity to connect with nature and conservation. The benefits of such connections — for children, the economy, human health, and biodiversity — are substantial."

*Drew Monkman is a retired Peterborough teacher and author of Nature's Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com*