

Ben and Linda Garnham

█ Hill Trail
Guelph, ON

█
█

Mayor Gurthrie and Members of Council,

My wife and I are residents of Ward One having moved into the area in 2004. I am writing today in regards to the Guelph Trails Master Plan (GTMP), specifically asking that the GTMP includes a mechanism for closing unauthorized trails.

Our home backs onto green space. As there was a premium for the lot, we enjoyed the luxury of added privacy for approximately 13 yrs. As a few adventurers wandered off of the main trail, exploring the green space, a “path” quickly became apparent to others. This began to happen in 2018 and 2019, and volumes of people quickly increased.

The pandemic brought about increased trail use for bikes, strollers, runners and walkers on the unauthorized trail. This trail would lead them up an elevated area that gave an excellent viewpoint of backyards and even gave people the vantage point of looking directly into houses. People would walk very close to, and in some sparse areas, above the deciduous living fence. The invasion of privacy was disturbing, pervasive and was then further exacerbated in the winter when the living fence no longer offered any additional privacy. It created conflicts between residents and trail users who, for the most part, were not direct neighbours. Worse yet, the area was not a safe trail for users. Children have fallen off their bikes into the living fence, and seniors have fallen in the winter when the slope became slippery.

The City of Guelph Parks Department was made aware of the problem through our local councilor. The Parks Department conceded that the area had no designated trails in the Guelph Trails Map, that the required consultation to create a trail had not occurred, and deemed the trail “unauthorized”. The initial plan from the parks department was to renaturalize the area through minor interventions that included not mowing the grass and planting small saplings. However, because this trail was so well used the grass was trampled down and not given an opportunity to grow. By the fall, the problem was as bad as it had been in the spring with little hope for change. The new saplings were planted in poor soil, walked over and compressed by winter trail users, with only a small fraction of them surviving to the spring. The small measures undertaken by the Parks Department have been ineffective, very frustrating for residents and have simply not worked. A hard shutdown of such unauthorized trails is required to ensure no one sees this as a legitimate trail.

As the City of Guelph reviews the GTMP, a process for closing unauthorized trails for the following reasons.

- In the absence of signage and enforcement, residents and trail users regularly enter into conflict with one another. Trail users believe any area not marked is open for exploration. Residents believe trails should be planned and maintained. The Parks Department must be able to intervene to prevent areas of likely conflict. Bylaw officers have responded to a complaint about the saplings impeding people's ability to access the unauthorized trail, believing residents had planted them. It was in reality, the City, who planted the trees.
- People leaving a properly maintained trail and forging a new trail meets the definition of an alteration in the Encroachment Bylaw (Section 2, j).
- On one occasion, the newly planted saplings were uprooted and thrown into the yards of nearby residents and beside the trail. They were replanted, but the vast majority of them did not survive the winter. After another occasion in which vandalism to property was attempted, the police recommended installing video surveillance, which has been done.
- The trail has become an area where dog walkers have their animals run off leash. Animals and their walkers access the area from dawn to dusk violating the Leash Free Program Policy. This in turn, agitates residents' dogs, and vigorous barking ensues for the length of houses that back onto this unauthorized trail.
- As trail use increased, wildlife sightings decreased. Off leash dogs and trail users scared away wildlife to the point where deer, coyotes and wild turkeys are rarely seen anymore. Closing unauthorized trails is necessary for Guelphites to create a healthy, diverse ecosystem.
- The unauthorized trail behind these houses is angled with an elevation gain that has the potential for an accident. Addressing a known concern must be a necessary part of the City's Risk Management objectives.
- Youth and adolescents congregate on these unauthorized trails. They can be seen after dark using lights to navigate through the area.

While it is clear to the residents that the unauthorized trail needs to be closed, they have been unable to compel the Parks Department to act in a meaningful way, namely, effectively stopping the traffic of people with wagons, strollers, off leash dogs along with a large group of extended families members outside enjoying the nice weather.

In conclusion, trails must be created with proper planning and oversight. The City of Guelph must have a mechanism for closing trails that are unauthorized and outside the GTMP. Proper governance enables communities to develop that are safe and respectful for citizens and the environment.

Sincerely,

Ben and Linda Garnham