

**Avon Trail presentation to the Standing Committee on Policy and Justice, re: Bill 100, Supporting the Ontario Trails Act**

May 11, 2016

1. Chair Mr. McNaughton and Committee members, good afternoon; Thank you for this opportunity.
2. Thank you, Minister Coteau for taking time to answer my questions with regard to Bill 100.
3. First, let me say as a member of the hiking community, I am in favour of Bill 100 as I believe it addresses a number of measures that will strengthen and enhance the ability of providers and the benefits of participants in the recreational activity of hiking.

I do, however believe the Bill can be improved, and that is what I wish to address.

4. I appreciate the need for securing trails for future generations through a mechanism such as an easement, and that for some organizations, this could be a valuable tool. However, I am not here to address the issue of easements. With the exception of one arrangement with Wildwood Conservation Authority with whom we have an annual agreement, permission with our 84 landowners to access their private lands is simply word of mouth and a handshake. For us, this has worked well in the past.
5. What would help the long-term sustainability of our trail would be a provincial government initiative that encourages rural landowners to partner with trail associations in allowing the development of trails on their land.

My purpose today is to ask the Ontario government to consider granting a tax credit to landowners who give permission for a trail to cross their property. This makes good sense as both government and trail organizations share a common goal of promoting fitness and health in our society.

6. My name is Bernard Goward. I am the president of the Avon Trail which is a 111 km single file walking path connecting St. Marys to Conestogo. The trail was established in 1975; we have recently celebrated our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We have approximately 90 members, and have some 84 landowners. Last year our trail maintenance and construction crew logged over 600 volunteer hours in our efforts to keep our trail up to acceptable safe hiking standards. We organize and lead on average three hikes a month throughout the year with anywhere from a dozen to two dozen participants per hike.

7. Part of the mandate of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport is to promote trails throughout the province. The Ontario Trails Strategy's Vision sets out a bold objective: *A world-class system of diversified trails, planned and used in an environmentally responsible manner, that enhances the health and prosperity of all Ontarians.*

In 1977, some members of the Avon Trail joined others in the hiking community in making a presentation to the Ontario Trails Council in which they identified policies that would help create a healthy environment for trail-building across the province. One of the policies suggested at that time was some form of tax concession for landowners. Other policies have been successfully implemented, but to date no form of tax concession has been implemented.

8. The Avon Trail is a proud member of the trails of distinction across Ontario. We are part of the Ontario network of Legacy Trails begun in 2000 under the initiative of Hike Ontario with funding by the Ministry of Culture & Recreation under the Honorable Helen Johns. We are a link joining the Thames Valley Trail and the Grand Valley Trail. Sixty-eight percent of our trail is on private land, 15% on Conservation Authority and 32% of our trail is on county roads or highway. Two ongoing priorities of our volunteer members are
  - i) to maintain our existing trails to Bruce Trail Conservancy standards, and
  - ii) to gain new landowners so that we can get more of our trail off road and onto the fields and woodlots of this beautiful part of SW Ontario. We presently have an effective Landowner relations officer diligently pursuing this goal. What a positive factor it would be to be able to indicate to prospective landowners some gesture of recognition by the province of that generosity in the form of a tax credit.
  
9. Part of maintaining our trail is to be able to keep the landowners that we presently have. The continued existence of our trail is precarious. Just a short time ago I received an email from one of our long time landowners asking that the trail be moved off his land. This involved removing a 24 foot bridge, an investment on our part of approximately \$1000. Fortunately, there has been a good outcome to that situation, but in another case dating from two years ago, we have another 24 foot bridge stranded on another section of lost trail. That landowner's request to re-route the trail resulted in us losing five other landowners and an increase of over 3 kilometers of road walking.

Society has changed over forty years. When the trail founders knocked on farmers' doors asking permission for trail access, in most cases the landowners were affable and agreeable and had few if any concerns about granting permission. A congenial handshake, and a basic agreement that hikers stay to the edge of cropped land, build stiles to cross fence lines, and stay on the marked trail, was all that was needed to secure the trail. Today, liability issues & other concerns have changed that. In many cases, the landowner with whom we had made the agreement has passed on; the younger generation or new owner may not always be so ready to make that same agreement.

Our agreement with landowners includes the hiker's adherence to the Trail User's Code which includes respect for the landowner's land and privacy, offering a complimentary membership, an invitation to our AGM and access to documents on our website of interest to landowners. Special initiatives have included an offer to plant trees on landowners' property. However, more could be done to show appreciation for landowners' generosity.

We believe that if there were some tangible incentive for the landowner forthcoming from the government in return for granting that permission, that would have a positive effect in reinforcing our efforts to secure and maintain our trail. It would also have the added benefit of enhancing both provincial and trail association objectives of promoting a healthy and active populace

10. Thank you. I would be happy to try to answer questions.