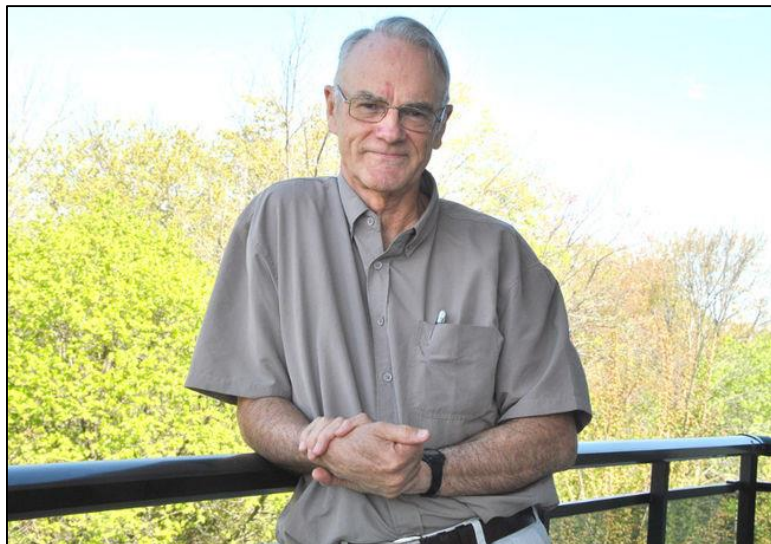


## Avon Trail president asks province to consider tax break for property owners who give permission for trails

By LAURA CUDWORTH, The Beacon Herald, May 18, 2016



Bernard Goward would like to see a tax break in place for landowners who allow trails on their property.

The Avon Trail president said as much in front of the standing committee on policy and justice at Queen's Park last week. The committee was listening to presentations from organizations like Hike Ontario and the Ontario Landowners Association regarding Bill 100. The bill is intended to deal with long-time trail issues such as easements, liability, standard of care and property damage.

Nowhere in the bill is there any mention of some form of compensation and encouragement for landowners who allow

trails on a section of their land—whether they're walking trails, snowmobile trails and even canoe trails.

Goward would like to see a tax break of \$200-\$300 added to the bill.

"It's miniscule compared to the estimated benefits to the trail community, when you consider all the types of trails, and the economic benefit. Snowmobilers particularly will go far and wide, stay in a motel for a weekend and get their meals."

There are about 85 landowners who allow hikers to cross their property along the Avon Trail. A gesture of compensation would go a long way toward the sustainability of the trail system, Goward told the committee.

It's not a new idea. The trail movement swept across the province in the 1960s—that's when the Bruce Trail got started and others followed.

The Avon Trail was established in 1975 and consists of 111 km of walking path from St. Marys to Conestogo.

In 1977 the Ontario Trails Council was holding hearings across the province on how to better enhance trails.

"We made a presentation then. And one of the recommendations then was you could enhance trails greatly in the province if you would recognize landowners with a tax credit. There are other ways. You might give them a relief in some way on their property taxes. That suggestion has been out there for a long time," Goward said.

Why it's never been implemented is a bit of a mystery, Goward suggested. There is a group of landowners who are concerned accepting compensation for use of land would jeopardize their ownership, he noted. The Ontario Landowners Association has expressed concerns about Bill 100 regarding easements. The fear is the legislation will eventually lead to expropriation where there are easements.

"That's unfortunate. The opinions I have heard is that it's an unfounded fear. It has unfortunately led to several trails closing in northern Ontario, particularly snowmobile trails.

"Fortunately, we as an organization have not had any trail closures. None of our landowners have withdrawn permission on the basis of Bill 100."

In fact, the Avon Trail has recently increased the number of property owners participating in the trail.

“We are very grateful to the landowners, about 68% of our trail is on private land, which is great. And we're very excited, in the last few months we've actually gained four new landowners, we're really thrilled about that.”

Another 15% of the trail is in Wildwood Conservation Area and 32% of the trail is on county roads and, in some sections, on busy highways.

The Avon Trail club has been around for more than 40 years but its existence is precarious because if a landowner pulls out of the partnership, a section of trail is lost, Goward pointed out.

“That's why we're really grateful to our landowners.”

It's also why he's hopeful the province will consider a tax break--so the trail system will exist for future generations.

Goward had just 10 minutes to make his argument in front of the committee and answer questions. A former civics teacher at Central, he's taken classes to Queen's Park many times but he's never participated in the process. It was an exciting opportunity.

The issue isn't expected to go back to the Legislature until at least September.