

Local News

Opponents line up for ATV battle

In Alnwick/Haldimand Township

COLBORNE CHRONICLE

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Groups on opposing sides of allowing all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) on Alnwick-Haldimand Township roads are lining up in preparation for the anticipated fight for council votes.

Alnwick/Haldimand Township Council passed a motion July 5 to obtain further advice on the question. After the advice from its lawyer and the provincial Municipal Affairs Department is received, the township is expected to hold a public meeting to gather further input before making a decision.

Gretchen Harris speaks on behalf of the Friends of Northumberland County Forest. She raises two reasons for banning ATVs from township roads and on the Oak Ridges Moraine.

According to Ms. Harris, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act passed on Nov. 15, 2001 states that if it is not a legally existing use at that time, it cannot be done. Ms. Harris says there is no county or township bylaw allowing ATVs on public property and has legal opinion to back up her statements.

The Friends of Northumberland County Forest position asserts that county forest within the Oak Ridges Moraine boundaries is considered natural core land, the most highly sensitive land on the moraine that must be protected.

ATVs have never been legally allowed on the land and as such must be considered an unpermitted new use, the group maintains.

If the forest and moraine are taken away from the ATV riders, "That will take away the honey pot," Mr. Harris asserts.

If the township chooses to allow ATVs on other roads, she feels there will be increased ATV traffic and increased liability for the township from collisions with cars and trucks.

With access to more remote sections of the township riders will trespass on private property, commit irresponsible acts and leave property owners liable.

She hopes the township takes a close look at the new reality if it passes a bylaw allowing use of township roads.

Mike Ainsworth speaks on behalf of the Northumberland District ATV Riders Club. He also chaired the committee that drafted the proposal the township is having reviewed.

He sees another, completely different side of the ATV issue.

Two years ago, he and about 60 others formed the ATV club to promote safe and respectful use of ATVs. Their membership has grown to 142. He says they continue to get calls from interested riders.

Mr. Ainsworth feels the township has to have a bylaw. The police want it so they can have something to enforce, he says. He is adamant his group wants to work with the municipality and the police.

He says the irresponsible racing people sometimes observe is the result of having no bylaw: riders sit on the side of the road waiting for a chance to avoid detection as they race to the next off-road access point.

He also estimates ATV owners "greatly outnumber those in opposition". He guesses there are a couple of thousand ATVs in Alnwick/Haldimand.

The president of the ATV club feels the criticisms that paint ATV riders as drinkers who drive too fast on vehicles that are too large are ridiculous. The average age of his club membership is 42-44 years. The membership is required to ride safely and respectfully, he says, and complaints refer to about five per cent of ATV riders, not the majority.

No bylaw is not the answer, in his opinion, because that won't stop ATV use. Having a bylaw with strict limitations is the safest thing to do, he maintains.

As part of his club's safe-use program, the club initiated the formation of the ATV Safety Coalition which has 15 stakeholders from police, fire departments and other safety-oriented groups in the county. They have enlisted Honda Canada to help promote the message of safe respectful use. They hope to capture parents and young people with their safety message.

"People don't want to see past kids riding up and down the roads. They uncover the dirtiest rock and paint everyone with it," notes the ATV club president.

Shelter Valley Voices, whose mandate is to preserve the environment, has taken some interest in the debate but has not taken an official stand. Its board of directors has forwarded a copy of a petition opposing an ATV bylaw to its members, says president Carol Hanley.

While careful to clarify that her position is in no way that of the board she heads, Ms. Hanley feels that, "if a bylaw is passed, it is one more intrusion into the sanctity of the area."

ATV proposal offers open rides – with restrictions

The content of a proposal to allow ATV use on Alnwick/Haldimand Township roads was put before council July 5 but not discussed.

Some of the restrictions include:

- speed restrictions of 20 km/hour on roads which have speed limits of 50 km/hour;
- speed restrictions of 35 km/hour on roads with 50 km/hour speed limits;
- no riding between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.
- all riders must wear approved helmets, hold valid driver's licences, and have valid insurance.
- ATVs may not carry passengers while on roads;
- ATVs must have licences.
- riders must travel on the shoulder of the road unless it is unsafe.
- exhaust systems must meet the manufacturer maximum noise level
- other required equipment is also listed.

Those meeting the requirements would be allowed use of all Alnwick/Haldimand Township roads if the proposal became a bylaw in its current form.