

✓ NEC staff aims to put brakes on parking venture at heritage park

By MELANIE HENNESSEY
The Champion

The fate of an initiative Country Heritage Park has come to rely on for crucial funding will be decided by the Niagara Escarpment Commission next week — something that could be turned down if it adheres to staff's advice.

The local tourist destination has applied to the commission to allow thousands of vehicles awaiting sale at the Toronto Auto Auction to be stored on about 11 acres of the Tremaine Road property in the off-season, between December 1 and May 1.

The park has actually been doing this for years but it recently came to the NEC's attention after a public complaint was made. Without the funds it receives from the auction, the facility could be forced to close its doors during the winter months.

NEC manager Ken Whitbread said staff is recommending the application be denied, since it's not consistent with the commission's rules.

"This is not an industrial park," he said of the parklands. "This (proposal) is inconsistent with what we're all about. It's unapprovable, from our perspective."

But Country Heritage Park general manager Reg Cressman said he's hoping the commission will follow recommendations from the Town and Region to defer its decision on the proposal, allowing the park

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an opportunity to prepare a comprehensive master plan for the property.

Milton council held a special meeting Monday night to deal with the issue before the NEC considers the matter. It unanimously supported a resolution calling for a deferral and the creation of a master plan.

In the meantime, Mr. Cressman said he hopes the NEC will let the park continue allowing Toronto Auto Auction vehicles on its property — something he said makes up about 40 to 45 per cent of the organization's revenues in the first three months of each year.

"Cash flow from auto auction cars is a very, very significant portion of revenue (for the park)," he said. "Toronto Auto Auction helps us pay the bills."

He noted at this point in time, the revenue is particularly critical since Country Heritage Experience Inc. — the not-for-

profit organization that currently operates the property — is in the final stages of purchasing the site from the Province, meaning it has to be self-sufficient.

If the NEC rules that the vehicles can no longer be stored on the site, Mr. Cressman said programs that require staffing during winter would probably be lost.

"Our revenues will take a significant hit and we'll have to find some mechanism to replace it or reduce costs to continue to operate," he said.

The application officially asks for permission to use three existing parking lots, a special events area and one pasture field as temporary parking lots for the auction vehicles.

While the concern of how this affects the environment has been raised, Mr. Cressman told The Champion there hasn't been any evidence of environmental damage from the vehicles.

"They're parking on areas that are designed for vehicle use and they're all relatively new," he said, explaining all of the vehicles were previously leased and are one or two years old.

The NEC meeting will be held Thursday at its Georgetown office, 232 Guelph St., starting at 10 a.m. If the application is denied, Mr. Whitbread said Country Heritage Park can appeal the decision.

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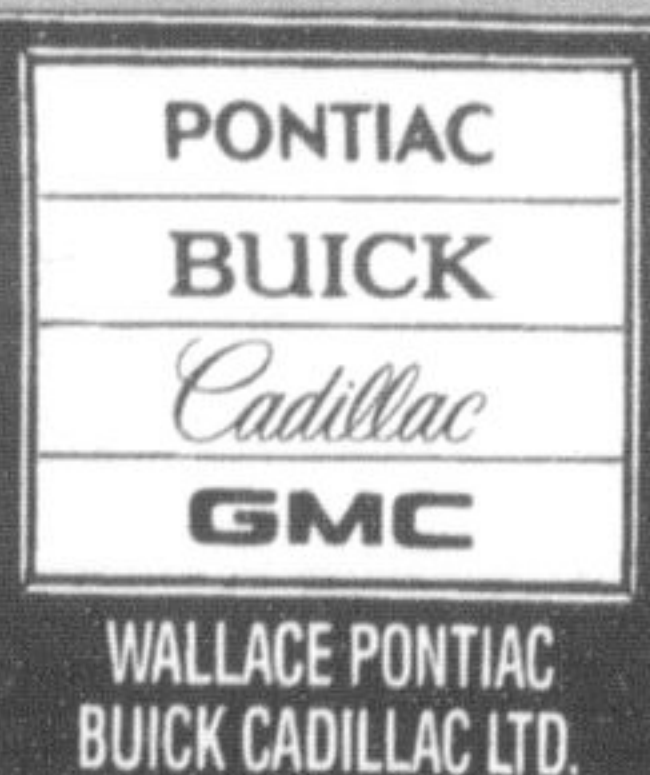
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