

An Opportunity to Protect Wetlands and Biodiversity in North Cowichan

Overview:

North Cowichan's Draft Master Transportation Plan contains a list of proposed recreational trail projects including a 2.5 to 3 metre wide bike/walking path connection between Stamps Road and Bazett Road ("Connector").

The alignment of the Connector will transect important wetlands and tributaries of the Quamichan Lake watershed and the project will have a severely negative impact on delicate biodiversity of wetlands, aquatic plants, and wildlife, as well as affects on agriculture. The Connector project proposal must be firmly rejected by Council to ensure permanent protection of the wetland biodiversity.

Background:

The alignment for the Connector has been in existence for many decades but was never constructed due to a lack of meaningful purpose, the significant costs of building in wetlands, and the obvious negative impacts to this unique habitat and environment.

In 2018, a delegation of residents from Stamps and Bazett Roads attended Council and requested the project be rejected. Council agreed to remove the project from its 5-year plan of the time. More recently, North Cowichan staff have undertaken a revised Master Transportation Plan and the Connector has been reintroduced by staff.

The purpose of this current note is to request that Council formally and finally reject the Connector project and to protect the Connector's alignment from all future development.



Processes

Master Transportation Plan Requires Council Approval

North Cowichan's draft Master Transportation Plan public engagement process contained no information on the delicate nature of the Connector site. We suspect those who supported the concept in principle would withdraw this support if they understood the negative environmental impacts to the construction of the pathway.

The draft Transportation Plan must be very detailed and transparent about the scope and impacts of the Connector. This process must include a visit to the site of the Connector and must weigh the severe negative impacts on biodiversity with any *potential* transportation benefits.

Connector Requires Agricultural Land Commission Approval

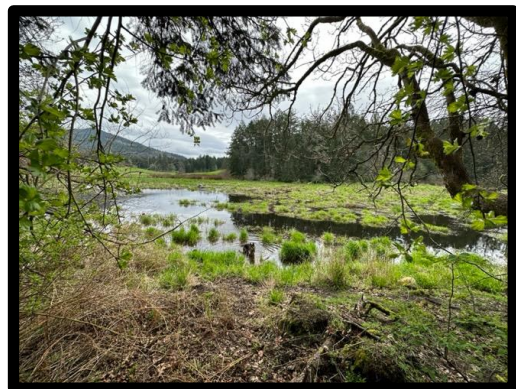
The Agricultural Land Commission's (ALC) had previously provided conditional approval for use of the Connector alignment as a recreational trail. This approval has lapsed without any of the conditions being met. Any efforts to reanimate the Connector project will require a new ALC review and approval under the new ALC regulations. The project will impact the farms it crosses in multiple ways discussed below (including fire hazard, potential livestock harassment, invasive plant introduction, soil and drainage impacts and so forth).

Additionally, non-resident car parking on the narrow country access roads may block entry points and also impede passage of the larger agricultural machinery. As per the BC government website "Trails should be directed away from or around agricultural areas wherever possible".

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/industry/agriculture-seafood/agricultural-land-and-environment/strengthening-farming/planning-for-agriculture/trails-in-farm-and-ranch-areas>

Connector is Inconsistent with NC's Biodiversity Protection Policy Project

Under the development of a new Biodiversity Policy, North Cowichan is initiating an examination of the ecological impacts of recreational trails. The Bazett-Stamps Connector would be a perfect place to begin as it has all the concerns identified: fragmented habitats; site degradation due to changes in drainage patterns and compaction of soils; and both humans and dogs negatively affecting wildlife.



It is the very lack of human development and intrusion combined with the inherent natural features that has given rise to the high biodiversity values of the area. Councillor Istace has stated that “some areas may not be suitable for any trails at all” due to ecological, biological or cultural considerations. This is one of these areas.

Connector Requires Review by NC's Environmental Services Department

This department is responsible for overseeing various environmental functions throughout the Municipality and coordinating initiatives across the various departments within the organization. The Connector Project must be reviewed by the department staff to ensure all the Climate and Biodiversity objectives of the municipality are being met.

Connector will Destroy Important Biodiversity in the Quamichan Lake Watershed

A visit to the site of the proposed Connector makes obvious the presence of wetlands, abundant biodiversity, and a fragile ecology. The area is rich with frogs, herons, eagles, falcons, hawks, owls, deer, otter, mink, indigenous plants and essential flora and fauna. It is frequented by bear, cougar and a significant deer population. The connector will bisect an extensive and largely natural contiguous area comprising a mosaic of agricultural lands, coniferous forest, deciduous woodlands (including Garry oak ecosystems), wetlands and riparian forests.



There are regular sightings of relatively rare and / or at-risk birds such as the Short-eared Owl, Barn Owl, Purple Martin, Lewis' Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, and Red-naped Sapsucker . McIntyre Creek has been confirmed by Dr. David Groves as a fish bearing creek which helps reduce the toxicity of Quamichan Lake and supports the adjacent wetlands. Wetlands provide values that no other ecosystem can. As well as sustaining a huge number of plant and animal species, they can improve water

quality, reduce erosion and flooding and even moderate the effects of climate change.

Environmental advocates and local residents are trying hard to protect and enhance these unique and treasured bio-systems.

Increased Fire Hazards

At either end of the Connector's alignment there are large rural properties that grow hay for agricultural purposes. During the increasingly intense summers, any spark from human activity -such as a tossed cigarette butt - will ignite the collection of properties and burn it all to the ground in record time. The hayfields are adjacent to dry Douglas-fir/Garry Oak stands and also surround timber barns and the farm residences; any fire would likely be devastating. The percentage of human caused fires in BC has been increasing, and in recent years – at least since 2017- large sections of recreational trails on eastern Vancouver Island are being closed more and more often throughout the summer months due to fire hazard. This is particularly true where trails cross private lands, as this connector would. This year the fire hazard was extreme on the subject properties from late May well into September. This is rapidly becoming the norm. The risks couple with the likelihood of having to close this trail for at least 3 or more months each year must be considered in the costing for the project.

Destruction of Blue Bird Rehabilitation Project Habitat

Western Bluebirds, previously extirpated from Vancouver Island, are being re-introduced and starting to establish in the Cowichan Valley, the only breeding area on the island. Of 3 known, active breeding pairs on the island, 2 pairs in 2023 raised 4 broods (2 each) on lands traversed by the proposed connector.

Indeed, one of the nests is located very close to the corridor. This specific habitat has been by far the most productive Garry Oak habitat for the bluebirds on the island in recent years. The Connector will thus likely destroy the significant gains made by the "Cowichan Bring Back the Bluebirds Project" which has worked hard to locate nesting boxes and transitional aviaries to

bring birds up from the US, and these birds have successfully established nests after release and bred adjacent to the alignment.



Interruption of Wildlife Migration/Movements:

The Connector alignment runs through private properties in the Agricultural Land Reserve and will require significant fencing for the length of the Connector to reduce direct human/dog disturbance in adjacent habitats, as well as to wildlife and free ranging livestock. This area is currently natural and open with no human made barriers blocking wildlife. Adding fences will inevitably interrupt the traditional migratory and diurnal movement patterns of wildlife moving between their traditional habitat on Maple Mountain, Mount Richards and Mount Tzouhalem, and may force wildlife into less optimal habitats including local neighbourhoods and onto streets, increasing human/wildlife conflict locally.

Harmful Impacts of Humans and Dogs

Allowing human access to delicate wetlands is not a priority nor a good idea. It is obvious the damage that humans and dogs do when venturing into natural ecosystems. Dogs will kill or disturb wildlife and humans will destroy biodiversity and increase the risk of wildfire.

Imported Fill and Construction in Wetlands

Construction of the Connector will require substantial infill and placement of culverts, resulting in contamination of the wetlands, as well as changes to drainage, and introduction of invasive species which is one of the most significant dangers to indigenous species and to hay/forage producing farms.

Negative Impacts to Residents and Neighborhoods

Stamps and Bazett Roads are low volume rural agricultural roads that are not suitable for increased volumes of traffic and parking that inevitably come with a public trail. Neither road has (nor requires) lighting, sidewalks, or sufficient road width to accommodate increases in vehicle, pedestrian, or bike traffic.

Introduction of these human conveniences, in particular, but not limited to, lighting, will also affect the essential habitat of animals such as bats and owls, causing interruption of their natural sleeping and eating patterns, affecting the resiliency of their populations. In addition, the increased coverage of soil by pavement will increase water run-off, reduce the amount of water naturally absorbed into the soil and increase the drought severity in the area, an effect that is quite counter to what is desired.

Also, given the experiences at other North Cowichan trail heads, it is quite certain that some members of the public will park in front of fire hydrants at the end of each of these roads, reducing public safety.

The Connector and surrounding forested areas could easily become destinations for the homeless and crime, as is the case throughout the Cowichan Valley. Local residents have already observed homeless looking for places to hide and sleep on these rural properties. The Connector will be unpatrolled and not accessible to RCMP vehicles and thus would become a prime target location for encampments.

High Costs and Displacement of Other Priorities:

As costs rise rapidly for all construction projects, it is important for North Cowichan to focus its scarce capital resources on “necessary” projects around existing infrastructure, instead of spending on non-essential projects in ecologically sensitive areas. The proposed Connector will also trigger the need for significant additional expenditures on both roads, ongoing maintenance issues/needs, and is likely to be closed for 3+summer months a year due to extreme fire hazard.

Questions for Council:

Has anyone advocating for the Connector actually seen the alignment in person and reviewed the impacts to biodiversity?

Is North Cowichan Council going to stand by its recent motion to protect biodiversity and “Assess the potential risks and impacts of various trails and trail use...on wildlife, soils, ecology, vegetation, and water”?

When private landowners, conservation groups and volunteers are working to protect and enhance the biodiversity of this area, why would NC Council want to destroy it?

Do the human ‘benefits’ of the proposed Connector outweigh the permanent and irreversible damage to the biodiversity of a natural, unspoiled Quamichan Lake watershed?

In an era of growing taxes and scarce resources, does Council truly believe that the proposed Connector is a capital priority and, given the enormous expense of traversing the wetlands, is this project defensible?

The Connector has a design surface width of only 2.5 to 3 metres, yet it will require the entire width of the right of way to construct due to the significant fill required to raise the trail surface above the wetlands. Is Council aware of this?

Stakeholder Engagement and Referrals:

- North Cowichan’s Environmental Services Department
- Quamichan Lake Neighbourhood Association
- Quamichan Lake Watershed Stewardship Society (a registered charity)
- Friends of Quamichan Lake
- Cowichan Bring Back the Bluebirds project
 - Bruce Coates Cowichan Valley Naturalists
 - British Columbia Conservation Foundation