

## Buzz about the Ottawa Valley Recreation Trail

By Ole Hendrickson

It's easy to see why people are excited about the County of Renfrew's purchase of the discontinued CP Rail corridor. The County now owns the major portion of a 296-km trail extending along the former rail line from Smiths Falls through Carleton Place, Almonte and Arnprior to Mattawa. Within Renfrew County, plans are being made to develop a multi-use trail through the Ottawa Valley from Arnprior to Deux Rivieres, passing through Braeside, Sand Point, Renfrew, Haley Station, Cobden, Pembroke, Petawawa, Chalk River, Mackey, Stonecliffe and Bissett Creek. This new "Ottawa Valley Recreation Trail" also will connect to the County's existing K&P trail in Renfrew, with access to Calabogie.

Besides providing outdoor recreation enthusiasts with a safe, scenic and direct route to travel up and down the Valley, the new trail has a huge potential to revitalize Ottawa Valley communities. The County of Renfrew has scheduled six [open houses](#) "to engage, inform and seek input from County residents on the proposed future use of the corridor," starting in Chalk River on October 19<sup>th</sup>, and ending in Pembroke at the County Council chambers on November 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Participants at the upcoming open houses will doubtless offer views on how to maximize the economic returns from the County's investment in this major new recreational asset. Travellers will want to know where to stay and eat along the way. Hopefully, new businesses will open up to cater to travellers, so consideration should be given to regular replacement or updating of signs with tourism information. The snowmobilers already do a pretty good job of this, but a year-round effort will be needed.

Throughout much of the County, communities with restaurants and lodging opportunities are spaced closely enough together along the trail to accommodate day trips and overnight trips. Hopefully, Renfrew County residents will take advantage of this feature. Given the rapidly growing popularity of cycle tourism, cyclists from the National Capital Region (including foreign visitors) might also be enticed to venture into the wider Canadian landscape.

Unfortunately, the lack of good cycling routes northwest out of Ottawa may limit the tourism potential of the new trail in the near term. There is no direct path through Kanata, Carp and Kinburn to Arnprior. Cyclists may choose to take a more round-about route, heading west to Carleton Place on the Ottawa-Carleton Railway and joining the CPR rail trail there. As noted on the website [GoBiking.ca](#), the ride from Ottawa to Carleton Place is "pleasant enough" but "like many trails that have been converted from old railway lines, it is very straight, and variations in the scenery are somewhat limited."

While it is true that rail trails can be aesthetically unappealing, some Renfrew County segments of the old CPR rail line are exceptional. Just west of Arnprior the trail stays close to the Lac des Chats portion of the Ottawa River, providing views of the Gatineau Hills across the river in the distance. It then turns inland and west, passing through farmland in the southern portion of the lower Bonnechere watershed. It swings north in Renfrew and climbs over the forested Bonnechere Ridge into the Muskrat drainage at Haley Station. After passing through Cobden it follows the southwest shore of Muskrat Lake, and then returns to the Ottawa River shoreline east of Pembroke. Further west, the trail will provide travellers with a much-needed alternative to Highway 17 through the Petawawa Plains. Beyond Chalk River the trail enters classic Canadian Shield country, skirting the shorelines of Sidetrack, Moor, Roney and Way

Lakes. Still further northwest, the trail again hugs the Ottawa River shoreline near Stonecliffe and Deux Rivieres, with spectacular vistas of the escarpment on the Quebec side.

For those stretches of the trail that pass through open farmland, and in the Petawawa Plains, tree planting might enhance its attractiveness if species and planting locations are carefully chosen. Trees provide shade and act as windbreaks – particularly important for cyclists.

A rail corridor right-of-way is wide enough to accommodate “sinuosity”. In settled areas, consideration should be given to some creating bends in the trail. Strategic placement of small gardens, trees and shrubs, large rocks, benches, information boards, etc. would make the trail more attractive to users and encourage them to slow down and explore nearby commercial areas.

It will be very interesting to see how the portion of the rail trail in the upper valley through the United Townships of Head, Clara and Maria will be developed. There, the trail allows access to significant tracts of crown land along the Ottawa River that have been proposed as a new provincial park, and that are also part of the land claim of the Algonquins of Ontario. During discussions of the CPR rail corridor at the 2014 Renfrew County Stewardship Forum, the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan emphasized their interest in developing the tourism potential of that segment of the trail.

It would be a shame if presentations at the upcoming open houses were to focus mainly on the admittedly difficult issue of motorized versus non-motorized use. The new Ottawa Valley Recreation Trail opens up many interesting opportunities that are worthy of thoughtful and detailed consideration.