

## Trails in the County of Renfrew

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Paddling, hiking and biking trails can generate new tourism revenues and foster economic development, improve physical and mental well-being, increase mobility for local residents, and foster connectedness among neighbouring communities. Health benefits of trails are particularly important for Renfrew County residents, who tend to have poorer health status than the provincial average.

Ontario government officials recently launched an effort to enhance these benefits by updating and refining the provincial trails strategy. Representatives of a number of Renfrew County groups with interests in tourism, hiking, cycling, paddling, winter sports, and health provided input to this process at a meeting in Ottawa last November. Participants at the Ottawa meeting strongly agreed that the updated provincial trails strategy should highlight active transportation as one of the benefits of trail development. Congratulations to our county councillors for voting unanimously this January to develop an active transportation policy and to include funding for active transportation projects in the County budget (see <http://www.thedailyobserver.ca/2014/01/22/county-passes-active-transportation-motion>),

County of Renfrew officials have previously taken steps towards developing a county-wide trail strategy. They organized a series of four public meetings on trails in 2006. A draft report completed in February 2007 summarizes the results of these meetings, describes the County's network of trails as they existed at that time, and provides details on the benefits of trails.

The "Valley Explore" website maintained by the Ottawa Valley Tourism Association features many of the trails in the 2007 report and highlights more recent trail developments.

Significant new trails since the 2007 report include the "east side" trails constructed by volunteers at the Shaw Woods Outdoor Education Centre, the Opeongo Hills Nordic Ski Club trails developed by volunteers in the Brudenell area, the Manitou Mountain and Griffith Uplands trail systems developed by the Township of Greater Madawaska, and the County's investments in paving shoulders to make roads safer and more attractive for pedestrians and cyclists.

The 2007 report recognizes that the County's varied natural areas afford great destinations for trail users, and that proximity to Ottawa is a plus in terms of potential tourism revenues. It also puts special focus on former rail lines. These could form the core of a well-connected trail network. Making them available for year-round use would be a major benefit to people living in the County and would attract more visitors from nearby areas with greater populations. The County has taken a significant step in this direction by purchasing the Renfrew to Calabogie segment of the old K & P rail line and developing it as a multi-use trail, and is actively pursuing other initiatives related to former rail lines.

Another County of Renfrew advantage is an abundance of water: lakes, rivers, and wetlands, including the Ottawa River itself. Participation is growing in group events on the County's major waterways such as the "Celebrate Our River" excursion series including the annual June paddle from Wilber Lake to Eganville on the Bonnechere, and what may become annual paddles from Calabogie to Burnstown on

the Madawaska' and from Renfrew to the Ottawa River on the Bonnechere. (Paddling and other guides are available on the BRWP website, [www.BonnechereRiver.ca](http://www.BonnechereRiver.ca) under the Nature in Your Neighbourhood tab, and on the ORI website, [www.ottawariverinstitute.ca](http://www.ottawariverinstitute.ca))

Yet more could be done to capture the growing interest in recreational paddling, and to celebrate the importance of water travel in our political, economic, military, and cultural history. An "official" system of portages around the dams and rapids along the Renfrew County portion of the Ottawa is lacking, although paddling groups in Quebec are actively developing marked waterways and public portages.

The County's 2007 report shows the entire route of Champlain's historic June 1613 voyage upstream along the Ottawa River as a publicly accessible water trail. Not long after Champlain passed the mouth of the Bonnechere, his Aboriginal guides recommended venturing away from the Ottawa into the headwaters of the Muskrat River. Members of his party agreed after a fierce debate. They paddled the chain of lakes and wetlands along the course of the Muskrat – a difficult trip with one day-long portage and clouds of biting insects – and rejoined the Ottawa at the present-day location of Pembroke, just upstream from the Algonquin gathering place on Morrison Island, where Champlain had his historic meeting with Chief Tessouat. It would be interesting to know if anyone has retraced this route in recent years. It has changed greatly since Champlain's time, now passing largely through fields and pastures.

Another worthwhile project would be to identify entry points and provide trail connections among and within the County's 18 provincial parks and 10 conservation reserves (see [www.naturenotebook.ca](http://www.naturenotebook.ca)). Well over half these areas protect portions of waterways and wetlands, but only limited information is available about how to access them. Some – like the Little Mississippi River, Constant Creek, Silver Creek, and Black Donald Creek – remain largely well-kept secrets.

With the appearance of new user groups, recent trail developments, and efforts by the provincial government to update its trails strategy, it could be an opportune time to dust off the 2007 report and launch a new County-wide trails initiative.

*The Bonnechere River Watershed Project (BRWP) and the Ottawa River Institute (ORI) are community-based volunteer organizations. BRWP's mission is to inform and influence environmental stewardship and enhancement throughout the Bonnechere River watershed. ORI's mission is to foster sustainable communities and ecological integrity in the Ottawa River watershed.*

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