

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

RESOURCES

Thursday, January 18, 2018

COMMITTEE ROOM

The Great Trail Completion

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RESOURCES COMMITTEE

Ms. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft (Chairman)

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Mr. Chuck Porter

Mr. Brendan Maguire

Mr. Hugh MacKay

Mr. Keith Bain

Ms. Kim Masland

Ms. Lisa Roberts

Ms. Claudia Chender

In Attendance:

Mrs. Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Natural Resources

Ms. Julie Towers,
Deputy Minister

Mr. Matt Parker,
Director of Parks, Outreach & Service Delivery



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, THURSDAY, JANUARY 18, 2018

STANDING COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

10:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Ms. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Good morning. This is the Standing Committee on Resources. I'm Chairman Suzanne Lohnes-Croft, otherwise the MLA for Lunenburg.

This committee will be receiving a presentation from the Department of Natural Resources. Deputy Minister Julie Towers and Matt Parker, the director of parks outreach and service delivery, will be our witnesses today.

I will ask members to introduce themselves.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I would like to remind everyone to turn their cellphones on vibrate and silence and that the only people allowed to take photos or video recordings are members of the media. The washrooms and coffee are out in the entranceway, I guess you would call it. If we have an emergency, we will go through the exit to Granville Street, and we will meet up at the Grand Parade if there should be an emergency. Members and witnesses, please wait to be recognized by the Chair so that Hansard has the opportunity to turn on your microphone.

I will now welcome Ms. Towers and Mr. Parker. Ms. Towers, would you like to introduce yourself, and then Mr. Parker, and then start your presentation.

MS. JULIE TOWERS: I have had the pleasure of meeting many of you over the years as I have been with the Department of Natural Resources three times now as well as Environment, and Aboriginal Affairs, and Immigration. At Natural Resources, we have a pretty broad mandate, as you know, for conservation and management of a variety of natural resources. That's minerals and forestry but very much wildlife and biodiversity, which is very much dear to my heart as a biologist - and parks, the provincial parks system.

It also includes the recreation component which is where the trails and the management of the trails come in. Matt will explain what he does also in the outreach component, the education component. It's a pretty broad mixture - we're here to talk about trails today - but they're connected, very much of course. Use of trails is connected to enjoyment of wildlife as well as nature.

MR. MATT PARKER: I'm the director of parks outreach and service delivery. Under my portfolio, I do have the provincial park system, the 20 camping parks and the 110 day-use parks, and also, as Deputy Towers was mentioning, the outreach component. We do private land outreach and we also have the Natural Resources Education Centre in Middle Musquodoboit.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Thank you. Would you like to start your presentation?
Ms. Towers.

MS. TOWERS: Bear with me as always, while I make sure I get the slides in the right direction. We're here, and we'll go right there.

We're here to talk about the Great Trail, which many of us also know as the Trans Canada Trail. It has been connected for the first time in Nova Scotia and across Canada as of 2017 - 100 per cent connection. It will never be done, that's the beauty of it, because it has many connections that will continue to expand. We can talk about that because that's related to the challenges and the opportunities that we'll discuss with you. It is a remarkable achievement, and we'll talk about some of the details of how this makes Canada stand out, and Nova Scotia is very much a part of that - way beyond our railway system even.

This is a recreational trail, coast to coast to coast. It's not just B.C. to Newfoundland and Labrador but also going up to the northern territories. It's literally hundreds of local trails and in some cases those are trails - many of you will know them from your own constituency - that may have already been in existence or were extended or created for the first time to join this, so it's now officially the world's longest trail.

It's multi-use, so that means a variety of trail experiences for you. It can be everything from a paved trail, go through a city park, or true wilderness. It could be a water route as well as terrestrial. We have a real mixture in there - best in class, quality experience - for not only Canadians but also international visitors. We want people to truly enjoy it

and that was one of the guiding principles we'll speak about, not only in the development of the point we're at now but where we're going in the future.

It definitely fits with an opportunity to show and demonstrate corners of Canada and encourage people to get into communities and people who live in those communities to get around.

Here's the map for Canada to give you a sense of how extensive it is. The green is the terrestrial or land-based, and the blue is the water-based. You can see how it stretches from the northern territories right across the country. There will obviously be links to Alaska and to the States, but we're talking about the Canadian components.

The next map is to show you - so this is 24,000 kilometres, just to put it into perspective of how long that is, so all 13 provinces and territories. Then the Nova Scotia component you can see here, somehow has a weird font thing going on in the middle. The green is the land-based and the blue that you can see, for example, up at the Bras d'Or Lakes, is the water trail components.

The biggest piece, unlike the Trans-Canada Highway, the Trans Canada Trail actually does extend down to Halifax so it comes through. It connects us with all our Atlantic neighbours and what you see there - and we'll talk about it - is the fact that right now it comes down through the centre of the province and it goes up and covers quite a bit of the eastern end of the province, not the western end yet. The total length in Nova Scotia is 1,280 kilometres.

There are three types of trails, just to help you understand. Remember, we have a significant portion, which many of you have in your constituencies of the Rails to Trails. There's 536 kilometres of rail trails as part of The Great Trail. There's 309 kilometres that are on roadways and there's 435 kilometres of water trail. Of that total 1,280 on Crown land specifically, which the department is directly responsible for as opposed to work with, there's 353 kilometres of trail - because we didn't have enough to do. (Laughter)

Here's the key to the success to get to the 100 per cent connection we're at but also going forward, and I'm sure many of you have either been involved directly or know many people in your communities who have been - it's the volunteers. Very much unlike some of the other jurisdictions that went with more direct government funding, ours was a community development model. Not only which trails would be involved, but how they were developed. That was very much deciding on it and then helping make it happen.

The Trails Federation provided leadership in that to organize all the different groups and interests. We had the municipalities, we had seven departments from the provincial government and almost \$6 million in the last seven years to help put that together, so a variety of sources.

The community development has been a mixture, as you know. It can involve all those partners or it can be a couple of local folks who are real keeners, like some of my friends who said oh, I think I'll build a trail in Cape George and go knock it out. A good friend of mine did the Bluff Trail. It's a real mixture that has put all those pieces together.

For the parts that the department is directly responsible for on the Crown land, we actually have a detailed - and Matt can speak to it more later - 10-step process. That involves everything from public consultation and standards.

So the Nova Scotia Trails Federation was a key player in helping organize people. The seven departments are: Communities, Culture and Heritage, and they're still involved; Natural Resources; Energy; Environment; Municipal Affairs; the Tourism Agency, of course; and Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal.

We have details, including the federal government, put that all together, but between those different sources it could have been anywhere from \$800,000 to over \$1 million from those different sources. There is also in-kind, and in some cases direct proponents put money in.

Some of the challenges as we continue to grow it and operate - and this came up during the building - the one thing about trails is that people are often very keen to build them, but to maintain them over time takes a lot of effort and willingness.

So Trans Canada Trail (TCT) is an organization. They don't own the trails. They can provide funding - and we'll talk about that. They set the greenway policy for across Canada. The one thing about the greenway policy that they use - there's a series of principles: that they're safe, they're enjoyable, active and healthy lifestyle is promoted, et cetera. They focus on non-motorized use, and so this is something that affects funding going forward, versus a lot of the trails in Nova Scotia. We can talk about that.

Again the community development model, we talked about that. One thing that Matt and others have noticed is so many people have put in a lot of time and hard work. As with all volunteers, you can start to get burnout, so how do you sustain that effort over time?

Opportunities - we know one of the obvious areas is to look at extending the great trail in the western end of the province. We can talk more and answer your questions. There is a proposed trail strategy that's under development with a lot of the different interest groups. The key is, again, who is on the trails, what types of activities. The only thing that's typically controversial about trails is motorized versus non-motorized, and how do you get general agreement on that?

Certainly continued interdepartmental collaboration - we have good relationships and networks, and we want to continue doing that. So I'm just going to stop there and turn it over to the chairman.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: We will start with questions from the PC caucus. Mr. Bain, would you like to go first?

MR. KEITH BAIN: Thank you for your presentation this morning. Being in Victoria County, I had the honour of attending the opening of the water road in the Bras d'Ors Lakes. It was true community involvement. I say "true" because the First Nations people were involved in the whole process and everything.

Not only does the water road connect a lot of areas in Cape Breton, it also connects to the green trails. We talked about the challenge that is out there is the maintenance. It's fine to have trails, but if they're not maintained they're not much good. So I guess my first question would be, whose responsibility is it to maintain the trails and keep them in good order?

MS. TOWERS: I'll turn that directly over to Mr. Parker.

MR. PARKER: The maintenance of the trails, it would depend on the ownership of the land. Speaking specifically on Crown land, with the community development model, we have trail groups that operate and manage the trails for us. Within that, there are a number of grant opportunities - municipal, provincial and federal - that they can apply for to get trail funding to help with maintenance.

ACOA has been a partner on trails, the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage right now have a couple of different funds in terms of the Recreational Facility Development fund and the Trails and Recreation Fund, Connect2 with Energy, the OHVIF fund, if the trail is summer or winter motorized, and then also municipalities. For example, HRM has a good trail fund for trails within the municipality that are not operated by the municipality. There are a number of opportunities for them to get funding to help with the maintenance.

[10:15 a.m.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Bain, do you have a supplementary?

MR. BAIN: I just wonder, is there a common maintenance policy for trails, be they on Crown land or owned by individuals? Is there a policy that's there that people have to adhere to?

MR. PARKER: Yes, there is. We have specs for our standards that the trails need to be built to and then also maintained to. Our regional staff throughout the province will do inspections as part of their daily duties and to the agreements that we have in place.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Roberts.

MS. LISA ROBERTS: I'm interested to know a little bit more about the trails that are on Crown land. What does that mean in terms of how much land on either side of a trail is protected from cutting? Does it need a buffer around the Trans Canada Trail and how does it work with the other aspects of the department?

MS. TOWERS: The key there is every time a trail is set up and designated on Crown land it will be set up with its own detailed boundaries, as with any land transaction. In some cases that will fluctuate because of historical reasons, for example, in terms of where the original right-of-way may have been on the old CN rail corridors that we inherited or if it's being established new, so there could be some variation.

What Matt can speak to is the standards. What tends to happen now is, we're setting up new trails so we did inherit some different combinations.

MR. PARKER: On our rails corridor, typically it's a 66-foot right-of-way and that runs - and that could be private land on either side too. In most parts of the province the former rail corridor has private on both sides of it, so there is about a 66-foot buffer there. Then for outside of the rail corridor it really depends on the land and the area that the trail is being developed, where we would have buffers, so it's not a standard answer there.

MS. ROBERTS: I'm just imagining view planes from a trail. Obviously, people are going on this because they want to be in nature and be active and enjoy that experience. Will there be consideration in terms of cutting on clear land opposite a trail to try to maintain those wilderness values or those ecological and recreational values in other aspects of the department's work?

MS. TOWERS: Every time there's a proposed harvest under a licence on Crown land for example - remember, you have to separate Crown and private. A private landowner can cut to the boundaries of their land, should they so choose, as long as they're respecting watercourses, et cetera. On the Crown land, whenever we receive a request for a proposed harvest, we have our professionals in our regional offices who go through it and they look at species at risk, they look at if it's surveyed. One of the things they do look at is recreational trails. It could be a canoe portage, it could be a walking trail, it could be any of those combinations. So that's built into the proposal - is that accommodated?

Every lease or licence that goes out from the department always makes sure that it retains the ability for people to continue to pass on the trail. In some cases, it's crossing one without interfering with the trail, for example if they're getting a right-of-way into

their land, but also are related to any activities - and not specific to forestry. It would be any activity that someone is proposing. It could be mining, it could be - we get so many requests that it's hard to keep track sometimes. It's automatic as part of that regional review on the details of what's there and what activities are in the area.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Maguire.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: First of all, I want to say thank you. The department has worked closely with community groups in my community, including McIntosh Run and the Long Lake Provincial Park group. I think these kinds of projects actually - for us anyway - change how people see communities.

In the past, when people thought of Spryfield, unfortunately there was a certain association with the community. We now have a 10-kilometre park that thousands of people visit. Kaarin Tae is in the group from school sustainability that are building that beautiful McIntosh Run trail, and the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal has put in 30 kilometres of active transportation trails. This is because of people in the community and your department working together. It has actually made a huge difference in communities. We have been through the process a few times, and I actually know that these decisions aren't political because we have been refused more than once, and you see different communities that are represented by different Parties that have received this funding.

I want to know what makes these projects eligible for funding. We do have other projects coming up and other individuals in our community who are going to be looking for money. For example, we just did the kayak launch at Long Lake, and I'm sure they want to expand some of that stuff. What makes these projects eligible in your eyes? What gives it priority?

MS. TOWERS: Remember, there are different funds that people can apply under; the Connect2 fund that Energy has, for example. They would have a standing committee, and they would look through the series of criteria. It's the same for the Off-highway Vehicle Infrastructure Fund. There are detailed criteria on that. Matt can speak to some of those aspects of it. Each one of those funding sources is going to be looking at things like, is the community involved? Is it going to be up to standard?

That's the general type of thing, but Matt can speak to some more of the specifics of the kind of aspects. Remember, if it's on Crown land, it's a very detailed process as well.

MR. PARKER: Just to elaborate, each fund has different objectives, so one project is not going to fit all funds. To use the Off-highway Vehicle Infrastructure Fund, a couple of the criteria there are (1) it needs to be motorized, and (2) it's not necessarily new trails, but they're looking to see if there are environmental safety concerns that are being addressed by this proposal.

Another important part is that most of these funds aren't 100 per cent covering the costs, so what is the proponent's in-kind contribution that is going to be part of it? It really depends on the fund. That information would be laid out as part of the application process for the funds.

MR. MAGUIRE: My counterpart talked about Crown land, and if you think it's difficult trying to get permission on Crown land, you should try to get permission for Crown land and municipal land at the same time. It was like pulling hair. It can be difficult, but I understand why it needs to be difficult. There is the environmental impact and obviously First Nations implications and things like that. It was a very thorough process, and even though at times I think it was frustrating for some of us, I do appreciate how thorough you were.

Obviously, everybody wants trails as they promote healthy and active lifestyles, but how do you ensure that this money is being spread evenly across Nova Scotia? How do you ensure that it's going up to Victoria and it's going down to St. Margarets and all those places? How do you ensure that when you're looking at the map, it's not, oh my goodness, 70 per cent of this funding is going to HRM? Is there a formula that you use?

MS. TOWERS: It's more than one thing there. For example, Communities, Culture and Heritage has regional folks who work with the trail groups - some of you may know some of the folks like Steve Vines, for example. They always know what's in play, who's working, and who's proposing things.

That's combined with a significant effort. Certainly the Connect2 fund at Energy, and the Off-highway Vehicle Infrastructure Fund that DNR manages, looks at regional - they're trying to spread it out as best they can, but people have to meet the criteria that are there.

The key is over time, and remember, most of these funds now have been going on - Connect2 is probably the shortest, since 2015 - but the Off-highway Vehicle Infrastructure Fund has been going for many years now. Someone may not get funding in one year, but it doesn't mean they won't the next year.

You're always trying to distribute it as best you can to share it well amongst those different groups. That's why it's so important and why there are committees to do the review to take into account all those different things. A key part of that always comes back to is, is the community on side? Has the community been involved in the development, and is the community going to be part of the development ideally, because we know that leads to the success on the trails.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Masland.

MS. KIM MASLAND: Thanks so much for coming this morning. I certainly enjoyed your presentation. You alluded to the fact that the Nova Scotia Great Trail connection project will never be done; it will always be expanding.

Coming from Queens-Shelburne, when I look at the map, the western end is certainly not developed, so my question is, will western Nova Scotia have any trails designated as part of the Great Trail Canadian system?

MS. TOWERS: First off, as people know, it's not that there are no trails - it's whether they're under the Great Trail or Trans Canada Trail banner. There are a lot of great trails already and there is a lot of work going on for connectivity of some of those trails, because as we know, there are a lot of pieces that developed over time, but really trying to enhance the connectivity. Matt can speak to a bit of that and how that fits within the Trans Canada Trail.

One of the bigger issues we'll face is a lot of the interest in the western - there are very strong folks really keen to hook up the motorized portions. Trans Canada Trail as an organization has received \$30 million over five years from the federal government to continue to build on to that trail, but their own policy discourages that from being motorized. That means we're going to have to be creative in the western end. If there is going to be a motorized trail, which is the demand from the communities, which is a lot of our trails in Nova Scotia, it will have to incorporate that. Maybe Matt, you can speak to some of the specifics you know of for trails in the western end and the work on that.

MR. PARKER: Ourselves, DNR, and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage are also important players in the trails file in Nova Scotia, not just Trans Canada Trail, we're actively working with TCT to both work on getting the branding for the western loop within the province, and then also trying to work with them on the greenway policy. Most of our trail is in rural Nova Scotia and the OHV community is a strong community and has a lot of volunteers in it and are very keen to develop opportunities. So we're working them to try to figure out a way that we can co-exist because it's really important for us not to get away from that community development model where the community tells us what we want to do.

There is significant work already done in the western end of the province on the former rails corridor. It's just the next step is the connection part - connecting all the pieces to get the loop in place and then getting it recognized by TCT.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Roberts.

MS. ROBERTS: I'm wondering in terms of tourism development, economic development, how connected the trail is to accommodations to parks. Would it be possible to put a bike trailer on your bike and actually make it a loop where you're not requiring multiple vehicles? Is there that sort of planning going into this project?

MS. TOWERS: To start again, it's that issue of connectivity. There are places, as you know, in the province now - Cape Breton and the Cabot Trail is a great example of that. I had friends that came down from Yellowknife so they could bike the Cabot Trail. Now that's tourism. So there are certainly places now where you can do that, but it's the pieces and the bits and how do we work to make it as easy as possible. We know there are areas in the Valley where you can do quite a bit of that.

Matt can probably help with the known sort of areas we can focus on for now to build that capacity - both for people that are residents, as well as attracting people to come as visitors and do that because the demand is huge, as we know. We've seen that in other jurisdictions. Magdalen Islands is a good example of that.

[10:30 a.m.]

MR. PARKER: Tourism sits on our Interdepartmental Committee on Trails. They are actively working on the trails file and you may have seen over the summer they've commissioned a couple of short videos that highlight exactly the experience you want; one being down in Graves Island Provincial Park. They had the gentleman from A for Adventure out there and while they were filming, they actually stayed in the park and camped in the park as part of their experience.

There's also another experience up in Cape Breton, so Tourism is really working with not only DNR but Communities, Culture and Heritage and the other departments to figure out different opportunities for that. I believe they are actually doing some surveys with their clients this summer on trails and what types of accommodations they want, what types of experiences they want, to better help us understand what tourism wants from that experience.

MS. ROBERTS: I'd be interested to know a little bit more about the trail - if my geography is not bad - that appears to go through the Margaree Valley to the Bras d'Or Lakes. That's an area that I've been hearing a lot about in my general work as NDP spokesperson for DNR and a lot of interest in possibly a second community forest project in that area. I'm wondering, is that part of the trail on Crown land? Are there any particular potentials or challenges on that section of the trail through the Margaree Valley?

MR. PARKER: I don't specifically know the answer to that question in terms of the ownership. In terms of our interaction, there hasn't been very much conflict in that area, in terms of issues or challenges. I'm not 100 per cent sure on the ownership there.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: Thanks for the presentation. I have a couple of questions. I come from the western area as well and I'm just looking at the map. It wasn't a very good

picture up there, it was blocked by some things but anyway, I'm looking at it a little closer here.

I know there are trails in my area. As an example, one was done I think through Connect2, Department of Energy. That was a couple of years ago. That trail has been completed or that portion of that trail. There are many other trails and it's amazing how many people use these trails. In the last decade it has become quite something, how many people are into trails, whether they are biking or walking. I also have a local snowmobile organization that runs a trail and has for years and I think we've made some commitments over the years for them, but there are a lot of them.

It's interesting that I see none of them posted, specifically that one that Connect2 had already invested in - time goes quickly - I think two or three years ago or something like that. How long does that actually take, is my first question? How long does it actually take to get the map updated, if you will, or to record this? It would be known that that trail would have been in place, investments were made and so forth. How long does it take to get this kind of stuff documented? I think Kim had talked as well about we know there are trails out there - how long to put it together so we see an updated version of it?

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Maybe, Ms. Towers, you can clarify because I think that came up in your opening remarks.

MS. TOWERS: That's very much part of the trail strategy. Many of you may have gone on the Trails Federation, there are various websites that show trails in Nova Scotia. Trails Nova Scotia certainly has a fairly good one. Remember, there are ones that are on Crown land and ones that are on private. The attempt is to enhance that.

One of the items that got identified by the trails organizations is making it easy for people to find trails and also one of the things we're always concerned about is they know what they're getting into. If it's a simple level trail, it's easy to work for mobility issues, or it's a true wilderness trail. As you may know, sometimes that's when we get search and rescue in. People go in, they are relying on smartphones and they don't have good maps with them and they're not prepared, which is one of the things we're always raising through the educational awareness.

As far as specific updates to maps, I'll ask Matt to speak to that. There is so much going on all the time not only to build trails but to keep them maintained and to keep up the information, because sometimes the information that is there was put up when it was a piece of the trail and then it has been extended, so it may be showing the trail but it may not show the additions to it, for example.

I'll turn it over to Matt.

MR. PARKER: The map specifically in the slide deck is only showing the Trans Canada Trail, but to Deputy Towers' remarks, one of the actions in the trail strategy is to develop a better portal, a better place, for folks to be able to find maps and where to go on maps.

MR. PORTER: It's interesting that you mention the smartphone, the technology piece of all this. There are people who are out there using them to find their way around. We have a lot of trails in my area, and people ask all the time, where are these trails? They come to town, and they want to bike - what's the trail like, and so on.

We have a fair bit of abandoned rail between the Halifax area, the Windsor Junction area, wherever it ends, through to my area that lots of people would like to see developed as well. Although I don't know that there's a group out there that has actually seriously gotten together yet to bring that forward, I think there's a lot of interest in that.

I was curious about the recording part because people are actually looking up trail A, B, or C, or they're looking at maps of the local area to find out where they can go and walk for 10 miles or whatever they would like to do when they are there. It's a big piece.

I don't mean to sound critical - I'm not. I think it's great what we're doing and that the trails are there. It's just that the sooner we can get things updated probably is a good idea, given that it is so popular. I'm amazed in the last decade how many people are out there in the woods and on trails, snowmobiling and biking and four-wheeling and whatever it is they're doing for recreation, and there are times when people get lost. Yes, that's correct. Anyway, thanks very much.

MS. TOWERS: I think that speaks to us thinking ahead not only to building trails but also promoting the use of them, whatever the use may be, and also the information about them as I said. Not only what the quality of the trail is so that people know what to expect, but also if it's motorized or non-motorized. Can you take your dog or not? Is it good for children? There's a water source or there isn't a water source. There's a lot of related information about that on what to expect so that people can go on them prepared, because part of our responsibility as well is trying to make sure people are safe when they go on those.

I think it is important for people to know physically where they are, to have good signs for the trail heads and signage along trails so people go the right way. Especially one of the things we know is that often trails get developed, but they get separate footpaths, or there's historical ones, and people wander off on those.

I think it also speaks to how, as we go forward, part of our thinking around planning for trails and funding around trails can be around the promotion and the signage, not just physically building the trail.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Bain.

MR. BAIN: I guess I'm going to stick to the Bras d'Or Lakes and the Cape Breton area now for a few minutes. Are all the trails identified within Cape Breton, both water and green trails? Have all the launches been made? I guess that would be my first question, and I'll have a supplementary after that.

MR. PARKER: To my knowledge, I don't know of any that aren't. I know that that was one of the big pushes last summer, to make sure of the signage so people knew where they were on The Great Trail. I don't have it exactly launch by launch, but I know that that was a big push. That was led by the Nova Scotia Trails Federation and the TCT national folks.

MR. BAIN: As an aside, I know that one has been part of the Trans Canada Trail system for ages, as long as the Trans Canada Trail has been around. That's the Old Branch Road, close to North Sydney town limits. A lot of complaints come in about the condition of the area. Because it's called the Old Branch Road, I don't know if it might be Crown land or not. Maybe you could check that one out.

In order to see if trails are successful, the usage has to be tracked in some way. My question would be, how do you track the usage to see whether or not they're being used to their best?

MR. PARKER: We have a number of different methods to do that. Certain groups are a little bit more organized in terms of that part of their business. They'll go out on Saturday and do some actual patrols of the trail in terms of the uses, and then also count numbers for us. Ourselves as a department, we are slowly building up our inventory but I believe we have 12 or 14 trail counters. These are little devices that we hide in the woods so nobody can see them that count people going past them. We also have a couple that are for cars basically. We hide them in the trail to count OHV traffic on the trails.

We're slowly getting more information on that and we use it to help us. We've used it in terms of when we've had a trail that hasn't been developed to help the community get some information on what type of use and what the use is to help them with some funding and whatnot.

MR. BAIN: Is there enforcement along these trails? We know that at various times a lot of things can happen. Is it DNR that does any enforcement that's required?

MR. PARKER: There is enforcement. The conservation officers are with the Department of Environment and those are the folks that do the enforcement. I also know that some of the local police forces will also do some enforcement on the trails too.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Chender.

MS. CLAUDIA CHENDER: Thanks for being here. From my understanding, one of the main challenges around getting these trails we've been discussing as part of the Trans Canada trails is the connectivity. I know it's referenced somewhere in here, but if you could speak to it - I know we have the Blue Route now, which in fact has connectivity around the province and certainly through that western loop. I just wonder whether there's some consideration of that becoming part of the Trans Canada Trail or some adjacent property or how that's considered in this network.

MR. PARKER: The Blue Route is an all-highway route. There is no trail. It's on the shoulder of the road and so the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal will look for opportunities where the shoulder width is proper and the traffic flows are appropriate for cycling.

There are instances just north of Truro - Earlton area - where the Blue Route and the Trans Canada Trail are the same trail. We have in spots buddied up on that, but it is an opportunity to connect some trails, and that's what they're doing up there - using the Blue Route to connect the Trans Canada Trail.

MS. CHENDER: I know we're sort of getting at this in a number of different ways, but if you could sort of speak to a trajectory or timeline around extending these trails and what that looks like. Would it be that in four years we suddenly see the western loop entirely on this map or could it be that piece by piece it's added to the Trans Canada? What does that look like in terms of your own strategic planning of extending the network across the province?

MS. TOWERS: I think the key there is, what do communities want? That's where the idea of the trails strategy - all of the work to date as well, we use as a reference, but it's almost like all the work people have been doing in the trail organizations is coming together and they took the time to write it down about all the things they saw as they need to work on and to enhance.

So inevitably we're going to have pieces, because in many cases it's individuals in local areas saying, this is my walking route, and then maybe I can enhance it and other people will start knowing about it, and it grows almost organically.

The areas that the department intends to work on are often the larger ones, particularly if there is a connection to the Crown land or the Rails to Trails corridor. Matt can speak about the timing on some of those pieces, but it's going to be affected by whether the communities are ready and if they have all agreed about the uses on the trail, because that is usually the most problematic to work through. Neighbours have to agree to a large extent. Visitors get what we identify as reasonable overlapping activities.

There's almost no end to it, because people will probably continue. I think the growth in that will be in probably a lot of those satellite trails - the ones that are just

walking, the local ones. What Matt can speak to - which ties into your question more directly - are those larger trails, the rail-to-trail type ones.

[10:45 a.m.]

MR. PARKER: Thankfully while we are going on about getting the main route through the province, there was still work going on in the western loop. There are quite a few trails already developed in the western loop. Really, it's to get it branded by TCT, that's what we're in discussion for now.

If the Trails Federation, government, and TCT can agree on the loop and the plan, then I would see that there could be some branding sooner rather than later, of the trails that have already been developed.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Horne.

MR. BILL HORNE: Good morning. Thank you very much for showing up here and being involved in this discussion. I think it's an extremely valuable project for communities to work together. It's one that I've been involved with, not every single time but I've been to quite a few of the meetings.

It's very slow in getting a trails group together to actually get money and it takes a lot of money to develop a kilometre of a trail to a certain spec, such as wheelchair accessible. We do have a lot of remnants of old roads, K-class roads, J-class roads, old coach roads, old post roads, railways - abandoned railway tracks - and hopefully we'll have one group of ours working on the one going to the Valley eventually. They are still owned by a rail company, so until they abandon it, I guess it's still there.

What I wanted to get around to talk about, and we're hearing a little bit of it now, is there's such a variety of types of trails. We have a trail that's going to hook up with Dartmouth, through Lake William Trail, and we just garnered some money, \$6,000 or \$7,000 to build a bridge across the railway, with some of the old Angus L. Macdonald Bridge platforms, I guess. It's slow.

We have a group from our SWEPS - Shubenacadie Watershed Environmental Protection Society - and have a subcommittee that does only trails. There's probably 20 people involved in that and they're very active. We opened one up officially here just a few months ago, in the Fall. It's only a short section, maybe less than a kilometre, but it is to the spec of wheelchair accessible.

We are hooking up to some of our parks, the McDonald Sports Park in Waverley, which is leased land from the Department of Natural Resources. It is coming along very well, and that's going to be part of the trail that's going to be hooking up to the Lake William Trail into Burnside Park and eventually right down to Halifax Harbour.

People in our community, some of the people who are involved in the committee and others who are waiting to see it finished are very interested in bicycling, taking that to work. We're only 15 kilometres to Burnside. They would like to see a lot of assistance, I guess, from many different departments and Natural Resources, to help them garner some money. I know the municipalities have gotten a fair amount from HRTA, the Halifax Regional Trails Association . . .

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Do you have a question for Mr. Parker?

MR. HORNE: Yes. I guess the question is, how do you see coordinating or who should coordinate all the different ways, the seven departments that give money or grants? I just find it very difficult to figure a way through the system on that. I know it takes a long time to do even small portions of trails and a lot of money, so good coordination makes it easier for people to apply for money and grant the money. I wonder if you could talk about that, some aspects of that coordination.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Towers.

MS. TOWERS: You may remember I mentioned, and I believe that Matt did as well, that there was an interdepartmental collaboration not only to develop the Trans Canada Trail but that continues. That includes folks like those local recreation coordinators. So there are the seven departments that continue already on the interdepartmental committee that regularly meets, not only within the province but they also interact regularly with the Trails Federation. Remember, the federation is that coalition of individual trail organizations as well.

Matt can speak to some of the specifics to maybe help you about how we are already trying to make it easier for people to have a point of contact, but that those kinds of conversations can happen easily across the different organizations and agencies.

MR. PARKER: The Interdepartmental Committee on Trails is really important to that discussion. One of our standing agenda items is around funding and making sure that all the departments know what is going on with other departments, in terms of funding and in terms of grant opportunities. Actually most of the folks who sit on that committee are also sitting on the committees that help with the grant proposals. That's the work that's happening now.

One of the recognitions by both the government and by the trails community in development of the shared trails strategy is the idea of how government can be more coordinated, more flexible, more easy to navigate for the trail manager. One of the risks we have with community development is burnout from our volunteers so how can we, as a government, make it more appealing for volunteers to step up and work in the trails world. That is an important action out of our trails strategy.

MR. HORNE: We also have ATV groups, we have snowmobile associations. I know the local snowmobile association grooms trails, they have big machines that travel through the woods and groom the trails which have been to a certain standard so they can do that. They actually have stop signs here, directional signs for snowmobilers to go and use, very sophisticated systems they have through the Grand Lake area and Fall River.

How do they fit into the picture, too? Are they part of the trails groups? I know some of them have their own associations and go out and build trails themselves. I'm just wondering how DNR looks at that.

MS. TOWERS: First off, as with many Nova Scotians, they are often in six different groups at the same time so it's often the same individuals who are very active. They may be hiking one day and on the snowmobile, whenever we finally get snow, as a cross-country skier I can hardly wait, so it's the combination of those things, but they are definitely involved.

Matt can speak to maybe the different organizations that are already in the different trail coalitions and organizations and how they work together because we interact with all of them, as does Communities, Culture and Heritage regularly, it's ongoing. That's why we have dedicated staff who work on trails.

MR. PARKER: The OHV community is a very important community to the trails. I guess when we talk about trails we talk about trails as a broader picture, as opposed to the specific uses. It's important to note that just because it is a snowmobile trail during the winter doesn't mean that it's not a walking trail in the summer or vice versa.

They are very important. We have regular dialogue with the ATV association, the Snowmobilers Association and the Nova Scotia Off Road Riders Association. They are all part of the Off-Highway Vehicle Infrastructure Fund Committee and then also ATVANS and the ATV and the off-road riders are also part of the Nova Scotia Trails Federation. They are all, like Deputy Towers said, on a bunch of different associations. The OHV folks are important when we talk about trails.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Masland.

MS. MASLAND: I'm lucky to have Thomas Raddall Provincial Park in my constituency, which is an amazing park. I was recently contacted by the local fire department who are first responders. Because the park is a seasonal park, it's closed, and there's no staff there. But locals and visitors still hike in that park in the winter. They posed the question around their concern of trying to respond to incidents that may happen while people are hiking while the park is closed, and there's no one there and the fact that many fire departments are taxed for fundraising and that type of thing.

As we see these trails develop, especially in the western area, what steps have been built into the plans for first responders for incidents that may happen on the trails? Has any thought been given to that when planning?

MR. PARKER: As part of the 10-step process to do trail development on Crown land, they need to come to us with a concept plan for the trail. Any of the work that they're proposing or want to do needs to have the lens of emergency response on it. If they're repairing a bridge, or if they're building a trail, we ask that they build it to a standard that would allow for emergency response vehicles on it. I'm not saying the pumper truck from the fire department can go on it, but the half-ton or a UTV. Even if it is a walking trail, we still ask them to build it to the spec that emergency vehicles can respond to incidents on it.

Also, a lot of the trail groups or most of the trail groups actually have a very good relationship with the local emergency response folks. If there is a gate, they would typically have a key to that gate, the fire departments would. They have that relationship so that there isn't an incident.

Most of our parks are the same with the emergency response folks. We give them keys to our gates because we do want to promote the use of our parks in the off-season. I say that they're not closed; we're just not servicing them during the winter months. We do want people out there enjoying them.

MS. MASLAND: Does the province have any liability if there is an accident that happens on one of the trails?

MS. TOWERS: It always depends on the situation. I certainly couldn't speak to it as a lawyer. Matt can speak to it a little bit too. One of the things we do with trail organizations or anyone with whom we have a Crown lease or licence includes liability insurance. That's built into those.

MR. PARKER: Each of the agreements on Crown land - a group is required to maintain \$2 million liability, I believe it is, for trails. We have a program in place where the first \$1 million is actually underwritten by the province, so any trail group is only required to go for the extra \$1 million.

That actually happens at the federation level, the Nova Scotia Trails Federation. If groups are members of the Nova Scotia Trails Federation, they have access to what's called bulk buying of insurance, so the rate is significantly lower. We as a government do pay for the first million.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Roberts.

MS. ROBERTS: As you look forward to the next stages of development and the challenges of maintenance, what vulnerabilities do you see in the community development

model? I'm struck by what you talk about, which is very familiar to me from my own experience working in community development stuff - that you have a few people who are serving in multiple roles. Of course, we know that particularly in rural Nova Scotia, those are often retired people who are aging. How acute are those vulnerabilities? What do you see that can address them moving forward?

[11:00 a.m.]

MS. TOWERS: That's a multifaceted question. I think it's a combination. One, it speaks to a more general issue about getting youth outdoors, because if we have the next generations who are going to have those strong backs, in some cases, to help with maintaining trails - it's about developing that interest early. Matt can speak to some of the programs that are under way in Nova Scotia and Canada around that. The more they're involved, the easier it will get, as we do have those aging folks that have been doing a lot of the work to date. But how do you continue it - you do want maintenance over a long time.

The other thing is, what are our trail standards now to build them to try to increase the longevity of them so that there won't be as much need to intervene as soon. What are the maintenance requirements similar to any road? If you can keep it maintained, you probably don't have major infrastructure changes to be made.

The other thing is, we're always considering things like climate change, storms. How do we build that into our planning, because we need to allow for that? We certainly experienced that with our parks - everything from tree branches blowing down on the trails, because that creates hazards, which are fairly easy to clean up, to washouts and bridges, which become much more problematic. Matt can probably add to some of those points, but those are the kinds of things we deal with regularly and try to plan for.

MR. PARKER: Just to jump off, I think it is important to get our youth engaged and get that next generation of our trail managers. Within the park system, our thought is as long as people are outside - whether it's in the park or on the trail - that's a good thing.

The last two years, we had the Grade 4s Outdoors program where we provided two nights of camping to all Grade 4s in the province. Also with that, because we recognize not everybody is going to use that coupon, we provided an outdoor activity passport to give them some ideas on what they can do outdoors and write about the experience.

That's one thing we're doing locally here, but also nationally the parks community is - and even internationally with #NatureForAll, and really trying to engage folks in nature. By doing that they become advocates and they want to see trails developed and maintained. I think that those are important.

Also - and I mentioned it before in terms of the strategy - we as a government need to make sure that what we control in terms of fund grants or support is really streamlined so that we get people engaged and we don't have the burnout from our volunteer groups. The burnout part is one of the things that worries me the most with our trails folks.

MS. ROBERTS: I know one of the departmental goals for DNR is to complete the protection of 13 per cent of Nova Scotia's land base. Is there any interplay between this trail work and moving towards that goal?

MS. TOWERS: Reaching the 13 per cent target for parks and protected areas will happen regardless, but very much one of the aspects - whether it's the Provincial Parks Act, Special Places Protection Act for nature reserves, or the Wilderness Areas Protection Act for wilderness areas - they all have a component to recognize recreation.

As part of that, many of you may be aware of some of the trails that are already being developed in some of the wilderness areas, like Crowbar Lake is a great trail out towards Porters Lake, for example. The Bluff Trail, which started even before that became a wilderness area at Five Bridge. There's a use that fits with the legislative mandate of those, but one is not dependent on the other. We can develop trails regardless of whether it's a park or protected area under one of those three Acts, but each of those protected areas - and certainly the parks - recreation is very much part of the intent.

MR. PARKER: I was just going to add that the trails in places are a very important connection to parks. A great example would be the Atlantic View Trail, where it connects Lawrencetown Beach and Cole Harbour with each other, so people can use both parks in different ways but not have to get in their cars, so they are an important connection tool.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacKay.

MR. HUGH MACKAY: I've been sitting here, busily jotting down probably a dozen questions. Some of them have been asked, but I may expand on some of the questions that my colleagues on either side of the room have asked.

My colleague from Hants West, Mr. Porter, was bringing our attention to mapping. The province has a very excellent, renowned mapping group, GeoNOVA. I believe it's housed at Internal Services now and certainly your own department has a very active geomatics, GIS mapping group, as do other departments like Health and Wellness and so forth.

I would think that hopefully the province is moving towards some sort of a hub of bringing all our geo data together in one repository, one atlas, that such a digital atlas might include regular updating of trails and all the associated attribute data that was mentioned. I was wondering, can you comment on if there are any plans such as that for a digital atlas that would include this and include other DNR sets of data?

MS. TOWERS: As you remarked, DNR is actually the largest user of GIS in all the departments, with Service Nova Scotia very close to that. It's part of what we do every day, keeping track of things spatially. It's critical for that. Trails or other recreational activities are part of that so we have a lot of information that's already in our data layers.

I think the key to what you're asking is, how do we get all our information more available and connected? Something that we are working on - we have been, and we're ramping up even more - is how you get all those different data sets available, making sure they're current, which we're always adding to, but also working really hard at moving more and more to open data portals.

We have a lot of information that's already available that people can download and often people aren't even aware that it's already there on the websites. The open data portal is helping with that because it's one place you can go for provincial data and then see what's there; you don't have to go to individual departments and then try to find it. That is helping so that we can do things.

I'm not aware of anything specific on the digital side with trails - Matt may be able to speak to that - but there are a lot of other data layers that we are working on.

MR. PARKER: It is an important item we need to figure out. I'll say that one of our big challenges there is if you look at the ownership in the province, that about 35 per cent is Crown land, we have no issue publishing the data for trails on Crown land. The challenge is when you come to private land.

A lot of folks have private land agreements, and a lot of the organizations and the private landowners are very receptive to them using the trail and having it as a trail as part of a connected trail, but they don't want it known that it's on their land. That is the big challenge, figuring out how to make more maps digital for trails.

It is an action out of our trail strategy because people do want the information and they do want to know about where the trails are, to help them guide their day and make sure they have a safe outing.

MR. MACKAY: Thank you for that. Following on that, I mentioned attribute data, which is critically important for mapping and for dissemination, as you kindly sort of focused my question. Maps are great for point-to-point but you also want to know what's along there, points of interest and so forth. I think that follows on my colleague from Halifax Needham, Ms. Roberts' question about some of the issues referring to camping spots but also things like toilet facilities, benches, shelters, and those sorts of things.

Within our own provincial strategy or within The Great Trail strategy, is the buildup of infrastructures such as I mentioned part of that - to provide shelters, toilets, those sorts of things?

MS. TOWERS: Matt can speak specific to the Trans Canada Trail or other trail sections. Certainly, the parks are the most well-documented. I just wanted to let you know as people may not be aware, a few years ago there was a DNR staff person who was seconded to Environment to work with the Protected Areas Branch. One of his responsibilities has been literally to walk all the existing areas to document uses - everything from camps to portages. Really building that digital data set so that it would be available for planning, particularly going forward for any trails but also other activities for people.

A lot of it has been in a data collection stage. I'll turn it over to Matt for anything specific to the Trans Canada Trail.

MR. PARKER: For the Trans Canada Trail, it's really the group that's managing the trail that would decide where and when they would want to put any of that infrastructure. When it's on Crown land we review it to make sure that it would meet our specs, but it's really up to the trail groups to decide that.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Ms. Maslund.

MS. MASLUND: I'm just curious, how many staff are involved in the operation of the Parks and Recreation Division of DNR?

MS. TOWERS: I'll start. Matt can speak to his group that are specific to parks that fall under direct reports, but remember, we're a distributed department so we have all kinds of folks out through the local offices who act as part technicians, part caretakers, are part of our seasonal contingent.

If I remember it right, we're probably in the nature of 150 FTEs who apply to parks. Matt can help with some of the specifics on that. He certainly has his direct staff but then there's also the other staff in the regional offices, district offices as well.

MR. PARKER: Within my division I have eight folks who work at Parks and Recreation because the trails part is part of that. As Deputy Towers was saying, the day-to-day operations are handled within our regionals, under our regional directors.

We have staff based at our camping parks and our staffing level there depends on the amount of sites and the amount of visitors, so that's what we work at there. Then we also would have staff who would look after our day-use parks. We also would have park techs who would oversee those folks too. I have a small and mighty group. Departmentally we have a strong workforce that puts a lot of effort into our parks system.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Horne.

MR. HORNE: Thank you again. You are really helping to disseminate a lot of information that we weren't quite aware of on how close you are working with other groups and so on. One thing, just a couple of nights ago I saw tourism advertising on TV to enjoy the winter in Cape Breton and see the sights at wintertime and it had ATV groups going down a trail. It was quite nice, well done.

Do you have some connections with Tourism? They're part of this group, I guess, government operations. How do they want to see this expanded? I see Cape Breton doing that and maybe other parts of Nova Scotia would get in on that too. I'm just wondering what your standpoint is on how tourism is reflected in coordination.

[11:15 a.m.]

MR. PARKER: They're at the table and they're a strong voice at the table because they have their strategy to double tourism dollars. That experience of being on a trail and being in the wilderness is an important experience that they are trying to market, so we as DNR, not only for parks and trails, work with them closely, but also the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage work on that too.

I know they're focusing on the winter in Cape Breton, but they did do some work down in the southwestern part of the province for trails this summer too. They did a summer campaign up in Cape Breton also. They also worked with us on other park initiatives to try to get other uses in our parks besides trails.

The challenge for tourism is the infrastructure. I don't mean the infrastructure of the trails. It's the ability to rent a bike - so if you're coming from New England or from Europe, chances are you're not going to bring your bike for a day or two of biking. How do we as a group of departments work to figure out how to get some of that infrastructure in place throughout the province?

MR. HORNE: I think this program is really wonderful for the rural areas in particular. It's huge, the number of people that will find ways of using the trails and being outdoors and in the parks. I think it's very important that we focus a little bit on that. Do you have any idea how many residents of Nova Scotia would be using trails on a regular basis, and how do you see that reflected as we go along and improve our trails?

MR. PARKER: We don't have an exact number for trails, but I will say in our park system for camping, we see 85,000-plus people camp in our camping parks every year. We estimate over one million people use our day-use parks. That trend has been going up the last few years. I don't think it would be a stretch to say that that's the same trend in our trails, and I would almost say it's more than our parks because people will just jump on them for even a half-hour walk. The trend is definitely going up in the use, and we're seeing that nationally in the parks community.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. Bain.

MR. BAIN: One of my colleagues was speaking about infrastructure on the trail system and it made something come to my mind; that's the littering that takes place. Many if not all of our provincial parks no longer have refuse containers, but they do have an individual who is the caretaker - for the sake of a better word - that opens and closes the park and checks things. Who is going to be responsible for the possible and likely littering that could take place along the trails?

MS. TOWERS: This is one of those topics that we all struggle with because it really comes down to behaviour and ethics. Even though no one would stand up and say they support littering, it's a constant, chronic problem across this province on every road that we deal with - and it doesn't have to be a back road. It causes a lot of problems, and not only the actual litter - you don't know what's in it. It could be potential contaminants, particularly if it gets exposed to water flows.

We have a major problem with it as well in the department because it almost inevitably involves food scraps that attract wildlife. It creates issues, as we well know, with coyotes and other things because they become habituated to it.

We have systems in place for properties that we're responsible for around the parks, for example. We have problems where even people are coming up to closed park gates and tipping their garbage over those gates.

From my perspective, this is a societal issue that we need to tackle very much from the start, from the time children are cognizant of what's going on around them, that it's not a practice. We're certainly seeing municipalities starting to step up their compliance. It's one of those difficult legal issues because you have to catch someone in the act - similar to setting a fire - and it's very difficult to do that.

There's a lot of reasons why we'd like to decrease it. Matt can speak to what they do now in parks to stay on top of it but it's such a broad issue, it's not unique to parks in any way. If anything, we have more control because we have more visibility around that.

Just so that people know, one of the issues around why there's cans or not cans - and Matt can speak to this - if it's there, people fill it up until it's overflowing and allow it to go. How do you handle that because again, it creates an attractant that we get into? How do you manage that realistically and ensure that we keep things as clean as we can?

MR. PARKER: Just jumping off of Deputy Towers, it definitely is a behavioural issue and education is important. I think one of the things I've seen on my travels and I kind of put it as a positive for the community development model - when people are using the trails and they know the community is managing and maintaining it, there's more of a sense of ownership. Unfortunately, you're always going to have the 1 per cent that are

going to do it regardless. That community development model, whether it is littering or it's destructing the trail, et cetera, there is more of a sense of ownership when they know that it's volunteers managing it.

In terms of pack in, pack out at parks, there has been some success in terms of, I'll call it, removing garbage cans. Like Deputy Towers says, when people have garbage cans they fill it and it is a visitor experience issue. Not only from having smells but you have bugs, you have animals - you have all that, and then it's unsightly. A lot of the U.S. jurisdictions, in some of their major parks that have over a million visitors a year, have removed the garbage cans - 1 per cent still do it but the majority don't - and it has been a success. It is about education and trying to change behaviour.

MR. BAIN: I just bring it up because I think you're right in saying that the community involvement in some of the trail systems, the community takes pride and continues to monitor or to take any steps necessary.

I was being specific, I guess, with Crown land more than anything else, due to the very fact that as you mentioned, our parks do have an oversight on what's taking place. That oversight is not going to be available in our trail systems on Crown lands, or is it?

MR. PARKER: It is. That's what the trail groups do for us. That's part of the maintenance. When a trail group gets an agreement to develop it, it's also for the maintenance.

MR. BAIN: On Crown land?

MR. PARKER: On Crown land, yes. Those groups do that.

MR. BAIN: Okay, thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Are there questions from the NDP? Mr. MacKay.

MR. MACKAY: I guess I'd like to go back a little bit on the tourism part again and following on some of Mr. Bain's comments and others. You mentioned tourism infrastructure - we were talking about that, and a challenge of it perhaps being when people come, where they can get a bicycle and that sort of thing.

I think part of our government strategy is to create the environment that will allow business to flourish. We would hope that the tourism industry would pick up on providing those sorts of things. There are basic infrastructure things that I think government can participate in, but we certainly don't want to duplicate the things that industry can do and should do.

Following on that, I look at things that are well-known trails, like the Appalachian Trail down the East Coast of the United States. Certainly, from my time in Europe I became familiar with many great hiking trails. Some of them were pilgrimage trails in Europe while I lived there.

I don't see trails within Tourism Nova Scotia being a specific - certainly not a pillar, but I don't see a model there as yet. To your knowledge, is there a dedicated effort at Tourism Nova Scotia to generate tourism based on trails?

MS. TOWERS: I don't know how many of you would have had a chance to read Tourism Nova Scotia's annual report that was just released, but a lot of what's in it, they've been communicating in recent years. What comes across quite clearly is they're really trying to attract folks that will spend money while they're here on the dining, on the accommodations. What comes across very clearly as a critical area that they're developing is the nature-based experience. They feel really strongly on that, and that's where parks and Crown lands come into part of that.

Everything from Dining on the Ocean Floor at Five Islands Provincial Park to some of the water opportunities, the bicycling opportunities - it is there. Matt may be able to speak to some of the specific discussions he has had with Tourism Nova Scotia on that, but certainly it's a key part of what they're trying to do to make that connection.

MR. PARKER: Tourism Nova Scotia does have an accelerator program for the Dining on the Ocean Floor. One they've recently done as a partner with us, a Halifax kayaking operator, and Parks Canada was camping on Georges Island. They actually went out to McNabs, hiked McNabs, kayaked over to Georges, spent the night on Georges, and then came home. They are working on nature-based experiences and those will inevitably lead to some trail work.

MR. MACKAY: That's certainly good news. When I think of Mr. Bain's constituency, which has the beautiful Bras d'Or Lakes in it, it may actually be the second most beautiful constituency in the province. (Laughter)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Third.

MR. MACKAY: There are 50 other MLAs who might disagree. (Laughter)

Coming back to that, again, I see that as an opportunity when I look at water trails as being part of this, it's a great opportunity for the eco-traveller, for ecotourism, creating those experiences. I hope people up in Baddeck and other parts of the water trail component of Nova Scotia will certainly get in there.

I guess, coming back to Tourism Nova Scotia, is there a specific contact there that I could follow up with at Tourism on ecotourism and such?

MR. PARKER: Heather Yule is the person I contact most. I would offer her up.

MR. MACKAY: Should I tell her that?

MR. PARKER: Maybe not. She might kick me under the table. (Laughter)

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Both Oppositions have indicated no more questions so we'll go back to Mr. Maguire.

MR. MAGUIRE: I just wanted to shift a little bit to issues that come up year after year, but before I get into one of the issues, I wanted to talk about - I know that both members to my left and right had talked about maps and GPS. While those are fantastic ideas, I want to have a discussion around Duncan's Cove.

You guys are probably very familiar with the issue that's going on down there, which I think is a private site has taken it upon themselves to promote different trails within Nova Scotia, which is a fantastic idea. I don't know if you've been down there in the summertime, but both sides of this narrow road - even though the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal has placed signs down there - are filled with vehicles to the point where emergency vehicles cannot get down there. They have complained to the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal several times. The people who are living in Duncan's Cove can't actually physically get out now because of this.

[11:30 a.m.]

One of the things that I've had some great success with is the sustainability school and we've worked with them now on three different projects that have all come to fruition. Right now we have about eight students working on a plan - Matt, I don't know if you were involved on that - to address the ongoing parking issue. It's not just the parking issue but what kind of reminded me of this was when you said about accessing over private land. What's happening down there is people are crossing over private land and there are privacy issues going on - not to be gross, but there's dog feces being left behind on people's property and stuff like that.

One of the things we're working on with the Dalhousie College of Sustainability is finding a separate entrance into Duncan's Cove trails and, at the same time, making sure that the trails are not eroding and the natural beauty of the area being destroyed. I'm just wondering, are you guys familiar with the situation? Have you talked to the students at the Dalhousie College of Sustainability? I know they are about three months in right now in this project. What are your thoughts on that?

MS. TOWERS: We are aware of the Duncan's Cove situation and it's not unique. We have another one at Carters Beach, which is well known. These are all interconnected

issues - again, very much the private land. We want to encourage people to get out, but the very nature of ownership in this province - usually private land is going to be somewhere connected along a trail. So at the same time that we want people to get out, how do you respect the private landowners' interests at the same time?

One of the advantages in the parks system is most of those, when they were set up, were designed to handle people. Where we're getting into situations like Duncan's Cove, and that's a nature reserve which is even more of an issue, or wilderness areas - they were designed because it's just the different Acts and the primary purposes. They are biodiversity conservation; they are not to encourage recreation. That's a secondary mandate in the Wilderness Areas Protection Act and it's not even part of the Special Places Protection Act, which is what a nature reserve is designated under.

At the same time when you're trying to protect a resource - it could be petroglyphs, it could be rare plants or anything, which is certainly the case in Duncan's Cove. I've been there many times; it's beautiful, scenic, a great place to go.

MR. MAGUIRE: You didn't park on the road though, right?

MS. TOWERS: No, I wouldn't do that. I'm a walker and it doesn't bother me to walk to get to where I want to go hiking.

One of the things that both Environment and Natural Resources now are trying to work on as we're doing planning for those sites is how do you handle what we call the front-end infrastructure? Parking lots are a big part of that - trail heads. Literally, how do you make it easy for people to start to go into something and accommodate those issues? That's the reality. This is an automobile-based society and most people are arriving by vehicles and we don't have places to put them, and our road system wasn't really designed to widen easily.

I'm not involved in that - Matt might be able to speak to the school planning - so I can't answer that question. But we have to plan for that.

MR. MAGUIRE: I'll just finish this topic off and quickly jump to the other one. Ultimately what's going to happen, how I foresee this shaking down, is that the students at the College of Sustainability, I've been working with them and one of the solutions - probably the only real solution for safety for that community will involve Crown land. It will be something that we'll be approaching you with in the near future. I don't know if you've ever worked with the school. They are absolutely fantastic.

My next question is something that comes up year after year, and it probably doesn't impact the members who are rural but it definitely impacts the members who are in HRM and that's around off-leash dog parks. It's something that comes up. I know that the municipality - we look at Shubie Park - has a different set of rules when it comes to

off-leash dog parks. When it comes to the province and the provincial parks, there's one rule and that's on-leash.

Is there an opportunity, and it's something that we've reached out about before in the past, is there an opportunity to maybe do a pilot project or take a piece of land, like we've done at Long Lake, because Long Lake is an issue. If you're down in, I think, Minister Rankin's community, the trailhead at Long Lake has become an off-leash dog park, essentially. Everybody is in there with their dogs off-leash.

Is there an opportunity to take a section of land and maybe do an MOU with a local community group like we did with the Long Lake Provincial Park Association and have them oversee that piece of land and allow for that land to be off-leash? That way we're not impacting all provincial parks - I see Matt kind of glazing over because he has probably heard it a million times. Is there an opportunity to do something like that?

I understand if we go in, we would have to change the legislation, and this could impact all provincial parks right across Nova Scotia, and this is something that we don't necessarily want to do. But maybe we can look at different communities, somewhere in Dartmouth, somewhere in Halifax, somewhere in Shelburne, or something like that, and find little spots that could potentially be used as pilot projects as long as we have community members who are willing to take care of this land.

MS. TOWERS: Ironically, this is easier than talking about cats. I can speak to this from my position as someone who shares with two dogs. It's a difficult issue because people want to be able to exercise their dogs.

But I would remind folks that it's not unique to parks. Under the Wildlife Act, and almost every municipality has a bylaw as well, you have to have your dog under control at all times. Really, it comes back to having your dog under control, whether it's on-leash or off-leash, so that it's not disturbing anyone.

That's because while people want to be able to run their dog and exercise them, there are other people who are scared of them or allergic to them. They have a responsibility to clean up after them, which is one of the biggest issues.

We're totally open to having that discussion about areas for off-leash, but it has to be under that recognition, especially if it's in wildlife habitat, which most of our Crown land and parks are, that you still have to have your dog under control. We're happy to explore that.

I think it becomes really difficult in a park situation. We probably have more flexibility on Crown land. Do you want to add to that?

MR. PARKER: I'll just maybe dive into the Long Lake situation. We have been having discussions with HRM to see what we can find around that area for Crown land so that we can work on establishing one. It is a challenging issue for us because it does affect our visitors, both folks with dogs who want to run them and folks who don't have dogs and don't want to be around off-leash dogs. It is challenging. It's not an easy fix, and it's a challenge.

MR. MAGUIRE: The opportunity there is potentially to partition a piece of land over to the municipality so it falls under the municipality rules and regulations rather than changing and going through the long and tedious process of changing provincial regulation.

MR. PARKER: Yes.

MR. MAGUIRE: Okay. That sounds fair.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Mr. MacKay, you had one question?

MR. MACKAY: I intended to put it in on my previous question. I'll make it fairly brief here. Looking at the water trails, what distinguishes a water trail from any other waterway that's used recreationally?

MR. PARKER: For the TCT specifically, they have identified it. They have mapped it, and they have actual launching points around the lake to both get to it for a day or if you were doing the coast to coast to coast for your stopping points. Other than that, I would say maybe within a park or wilderness setting, there may be some campsites that we may identify, so then we would map that. But it wouldn't stop anybody from going and doing a day trip down a river or going for a kayak out on a lake or on the ocean.

MR. MACKAY: Is the Shubie canal system in the beautiful City of Lakes, Dartmouth, part of the Trans Canada Trail? The Great Trail?

MR. PARKER: No, it's not.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'll ask for closing remarks from Ms. Towers, and if Mr. Parker has any words to add, he may.

MS. TOWERS: I'll be brief. First off, I would like to thank you all for inviting us to come. You can tell we're pretty excited and proud of the work that we do. We have certainly enjoyed the opportunity to answer your questions. Any follow-up you want to do, we encourage you to do that. You know who to ask now.

Having the connection of The Great Trail, our Trans Canada Trail, that's a significant milestone. We should be proud as a province and a country; that's pretty phenomenal. The luck is that we've been able to do that and support it but it has certainly

not been the department by itself. It's a lot of different people who have helped that, so many dedicated folks who have put that work in.

As we all talked about, the key part that is so important around trails is all the benefits we get. Certainly, the health benefits, the social ones - how many people go out when they're talking to someone as they go? And the opportunities we talked about, the economic ones as we enhance the tourism and the support services along trails are very much there.

As we started, the opportunity to get out and explore nature - what better way to decompress from your daily work, I encourage everyone to do. And the trail strategy that we talked about, we should be able to share more on that and have that actually finalized as we do our work with the trail organizations.

I'll just end it there, and thank you.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: I'd like to thank you, Ms. Towers and Mr. Parker, for attending today and answering our questions. Your presentation was quite enjoyable.

We'll take a two-minute recess and allow you to dismiss and then we'll reconvene our meeting.

[11:41 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:45 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

MADAM CHAIRMAN: Order, please. I call the meeting back to order.

There seems to be no correspondence for us to discuss, nor any business that anyone has brought forward.

Our next meeting date will be February 15th. We will have Nova Scotia Seafood Alliance as our witness. Ms. Roberts.

MS. ROBERTS: Can I just clarify the date for the committee meeting after that? I think it was changed from the initial date because it landed during March break, but it's still wrong in my own calendar.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: The March meeting you mean?

MS. ROBERTS: The March meeting, yes.

MADAM CHAIRMAN: It's March 22nd.

I will adjourn this meeting. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 11:46 a.m.]