

Money possible to help Springwater Park

Cheryl Browne

SPRINGWATER TWP. - The gates of Springwater Provincial Park may be pushed a little more open as council sets aside \$10,000 for its re-opening this year.

Although the park remains technically locked up, Springwater Township council has voted yes to Coun. Sandy McConkey's motion to set aside \$10,000 to help re-open the provincial park that's been in limbo since the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) changed its status to non-operational last year.

"I can't say how the money will be used," said McConkey, Thursday. "We just want to be able to have access to it in case the user groups need it."

Coun. Jack Hanna, who also voted in favour of the motion, said the money would be set aside from the economic development fund, but won't be approved until the township's budget receives final approval Feb. 25.

"I know negotiations are ongoing with the MNR and First Nations who are considering making it a training centre," he said, but added he doesn't know the current status of the talks.

After 107 years in operation, the 193-hectare day-use park's status was unclear last year after the MNR locked the gates. The 29 orphaned animals that were receiving care in the park were removed and sent to other wildlife sanctuaries across Canada.

Elizabeth Brass Elson and several other First Nations people quietly moved in to occupy the park in early April and remained there for the duration of the year, leaving just days before Christmas 2013.

Brass Elson named their campground Camp Nibi - the native word for fresh or spring water - and ran instructional classes on native culture, sweat lodges and full moon ceremonies, which continue monthly.

The also cleaned up after walk-in only visitors and called police when teenagers started fires and vandalized buildings.

Talks with the MNR and Beausoleil First Nation continued, and in December, Brass Elson said they were assured they would be given a voice in the planning and development of the park lands for the continued use of all.

"We were told we would be in a partnership with the MNR," said Brass Elson. "It was a shaking-hands deal with Beausoleil council. I was told to stand down and go home and warm up, so I did."

Although the gates have been chained shut since last April, Les Stewart of the Springwater Park Citizens' Coalition said dozens of people took to the trails on Family Day.

"People are still enjoying it, so councillors setting aside some money for its re-opening is a positive step forward," Stewart said.

Mayor Linda Collins, who voted against setting the money aside, confirmed if the budget passes, it would go towards the re-opening of the park this year.

"Nothing is determined yet. I'm not opposed to nurturing Springwater, but the County of Simcoe is taking the lead there, frankly because they have the bigger purse," Collins said.

She says the county has been assisting the township by hosting meetings between the First Nations and the MNR.

"We're not a big enough player so we need to join hands with the County of Simcoe," she said.

Spokesperson for the MNR, Jolanta Kowalski, wrote in an e-mail 'the ministry is pleased to be working with Beausoleil First Nation to discuss a future partnership for the operation of Springwater Provincial Park.'

Kowalski also wrote that 'the ministry is not considering selling Springwater Provincial Park. Maintaining public ownership keeps the park regulated under the *Provincial Park and Conservation Reserves Act* and ensures this land is protected for future generations.

Brass Elson said she and several First Nations friends will go the park for an anniversary ceremonial sleep-over April 1.

"It will be nice to spend some time in the park again."

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