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To: Mayor Savage and Council
Halifax Regional Municipality

I am writing as an active member of and on behalf of the boards of both the **Halifax Field Naturalists (HFN)**¹ and the **Woodens River Watershed Environmental Organization (WRWEO)**² to urge the Mayor and Councilors to firmly reject the recent Facilitator's Report on the Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes Regional Park³ and embrace the original concept of this Regional Park as expressed in the 2006 Regional Plan and reiterated in the 2014 Regional Plan.⁴ The key points are bolded.

I am sure many reasons for rejecting the Facilitator's report and proceeding with the Regional Park as originally envisaged are being forwarded to you in letters from citizens. I want to make two points that are critical from the perspectives respectively of HFN as naturalists, and WRWEO as an organization that built and maintains The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail.

1. From the Naturalists' Perspective

The Chebucto Peninsula is a now a very significant conservation area, with 29% of the land in Parks and Protected Areas, and an additional 12% in crown land.⁵ It is an attribute of HRM to brag about and that attracts outdoor-oriented people to Halifax for work and as tourists – and compels many of youth to stay here or return.

While these areas are significant on their own, it is critical over the long term that we protect and develop, as necessary, conservation corridors between the different blocks of land to allow movement of plants and animals between them, and vitally, on and off the Chebucto Peninsula. BMBCL and the adjacent crown lands, which lie right at the top of the Chebucto Peninsula, provide a critical component of that connectivity and have been identified as a pinch point/corridor area in recent green Network maps.⁵

As Prof Karen Beazley has noted, proceeding with the development as planned not only threatens the fabric of the BMBCL Regional Park, but even the BMBCL

Protected Wilderness Area, which could well be decommissioned if the development goes ahead.⁶

What I wish to underscore is that undermining the BMBCL Protected Wilderness Area would also detract very substantially from the long term conservation value of all lands on the Chebucto Peninsula because of the significance of the area as a corridor connecting wildlands on the Chebucto Peninsula with wildlands on the mainland.

2. From The Trail Perspective

The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail has been rated as one of the 8 best wilderness hiking trails located in proximity of major cities in Canada. Over the last year, use of the trail, particularly the first and second of the four loops, has skyrocketed. **Where once we might encounter a handful of hikers on a typical outing, we now see dozens, and on the weekends, hundreds.**

The ever-increasing use of The Bluff Trail is a major challenge to the board and other volunteers, as we try to educate hikers about leave-no-trace practices, and clean up after inappropriate use so that they don't provide models that further promote bad practices – all in addition to simply maintaining the trail which in itself is a big task. Indeed, as a board, we have had to put our interests in purely watershed issues aside as we grapple with the trail issues. (The trail could be closed down if we don't meet contractual obligations with DNR/DOE.)

The point to be made is that the intensive use of even a genuine wilderness trail should put to rest the argument that “we already have lots of trails and parks and protected areas in HRM”. Admittedly, we do have more than most major cities. However, these areas are part of our fabric and are a major factor in what attracts people to Halifax to work and as visitors (and that keeps them here) and what we have is rapidly getting over-used. We (the board and volunteers) talk to people we meet on the trail. Over the last year, the majority have been people who used the trail for the first time within the past year, and all say they want to return. They also talk about what a wonderful place Halifax is because of our trails and parks and wilderness areas and lakes and coastline. There are many visitors from away, as recorded in a guest book on the trail and through our conversations. **Our trails and parks and protected areas are our Eiffel Tower, Our CN Tower, as well as a major benefit to the well-being of our citizens. How could we in this context develop what is really a jewel amongst them: the Birch Cove Lakes in their Thomsonsque wilderness setting, offering a Keji-like paddling experience within a kilometer or two of major settled areas?**

We appreciate your consideration of these two points and urge you to firmly reject the Facilitator's Report and embrace the original concept of this Regional Park.

Respectfully.

David G. Patriquin

On behalf of the HFN & WRWEO boards

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. **The Halifax Field Naturalists** were formed in 1975 with the purpose of educating members and the public at large in the natural history of Nova Scotia. It holds well attended monthly meetings and field trips and is often called upon to provide input and share expertise on key land management & biodiversity issues. It has nurtured many professionals who now work in academia, government, with land conservation organizations, and in private enterprise, and an ongoing cadre of volunteers.

<http://www.halifaxfieldnaturalists.ca>

2. **The Woodens River Watershed Environmental Organization** was established to protect the Woodens River Watershed. In that context, the organization sought protection of some adjacent wilderness lands and built The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail in order to allow people to access these lands and gain a better appreciation for them. The Bluff Trail has gained a significant reputation locally, nationally and even internationally, all well reflected in a guestbook on the trail and by the number of users. <http://blufftrail.ca>

3. **Facilitator's report regarding negotiation of the proposed boundaries for the Blue Mountain/Birch Cove Lakes Regional Park In relation to the highway 102 west corridor** by Justice M. Heather Robertson, June 1, 2016.

www.halifax.ca/property/documents/FacilitatorReport.pdf

In the Facilitator's Report, Justice Robertson supports the case made by developers for a large development on the private lands that HRM had agreed in 2006 to begin to acquire through land purchases and trades in order to develop the BMBCL Regional Park (re: 2006 Regional Municipal Planning Strategy, reiterated in the 2014 Regional Plan)⁴. It is contended that only through such a development could the city afford to develop the Regional Park. She dismissed the position of HRM Park staff that "the Development Plan fails or only minimally achieves many of the regional park objectives..." stating simply that she disagreed with them. No consideration is given to the reasons why development on these lands was deemed inappropriate in the 2006 Regional MPS, which received wide support from the people of Halifax and was the basis on which the provincial government established the Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes Protected Wilderness Area in 2009.

4. **Regional Plan Effective October 18, 2014**

<http://www.halifax.ca/regionalplanning/FinalRegPlan.php>

5. My estimates based on the Parks and Protected Areas Interactive Map; see map in **The Chebucto Peninsula: A Significant Conservation Area**. Blog for Our HRM Alliance Hike the Greenbelt series at <http://www.ourhrmalliance.ca/chebucto>

5. **Halifax Green Network State of the Landscape Report. October 2015**. Prepared by O2 Planning and Design in collaboration with Anne Muecke, CBCL, and TransActive Solutions . Map 24. Landscape Pinch Points to Wildlife Movement

<http://www.halifax.ca/HalifaxGreenNetwork/Themes.php>

6. **OPINION: Blue Mountain plan fatally flawed** by Prof. Karen Beazley.

Chronicle Herald July 3, 2016; also her letter to Mayor and Council of July 2, 2016.

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1377283-opinion-blue-mountain-plan-fatally-flawed>