

COMMENTARY: The Salt Marsh Trail -- a community jewel worth preserving

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Cyclists use the Salt Marsh Trail between Cole Harbour and Lawrencetown, an easy ride for casual and experienced riders with natural sights and fresh ocean air. Photo by Eric Wynn /Chronicle-Herald file

Nova Scotia's parks boast many wonders, but few offer the unique and accessible blend of history, ecology and community spirit found along the Salt Marsh Trail in Cole Harbour.

This beloved corridor is far more than a simple path; it is a vital piece of our shared heritage and well-being. Its defining features are what make its current precarious state — reliant on a heroic but overstretched band of aging volunteers — all the more urgent to address.

More than a path: Unique highlights define the experience

The trail's magic is immediate. Walkers, cyclists, and families (including my wife and I and our family) are greeted by the iconic 3.2-kilometre causeway, a ribbon of gravel that carves through the heart of a vast, shimmering coastal wetland. This is where the trail earns its name and its reputation as a birdwatcher's paradise.

The tidally flushed salt marsh teems with life, from stoic great blue herons to bustling flocks of shorebirds, offering an unparalleled window into a fragile Atlantic ecosystem right on Halifax's doorstep. This experience is enriched by informational storyboards signs that dot the route, offering visitors insights into the natural history and rich heritage of the landscape they are traversing.



Great blue herons fish along the Salt Marsh Trail in Cole Harbour, N.S.

What makes this natural spectacle truly remarkable is its democratic access. Built on a historic, level railway bed, the trail is perfectly suited for all forms of active transportation and is famously wheelchair and stroller accessible. This isn't an arduous hiking path; it's a community highway where grandparents, young children, and people of all abilities can share the same breathtaking view.

Furthermore, as a critical link in the vast Trans Canada Trail network, it connects our local community to a national vision of green mobility.

The unsustainable reality: Passion replacing public support

Yet this premier public asset operates on a shoestring. Its very existence is a testament to decades of resilience; in earlier years, hurricanes and tropical storms scoured the trail surface down to the original sea floor. The solution has required over 20 years of continuous work, placing heavy quarry rocks along the trail shoulders to armour it against future storms — a massive engineering feat.

Furthermore, three bridges were miraculously rebuilt atop their original hundred-plus-year-old pilings, blending amazing engineering with historical preservation.

This monumental upkeep now falls almost entirely to dedicated volunteers of the Cole Harbour Parks and Trails Association (CHPTA). They are the unseen force maintaining the surface, monitoring the delicate marsh edges, and providing the friendly presence that keeps the trail safe.

While provincial grants exist, they are often project-specific and competitive, leaving core, ongoing maintenance to volunteer labour and passion. Thus far, the association has been fortunate to receive financial and in-kind contributions from a few individuals, organizations and corporations that have stepped up to support specific maintenance projects.

Securing the legacy: A call for a new support model

The contrast is stark. We have a world-class, accessible green space that promotes health, connects communities and showcases our natural heritage.

Simultaneously, we rely on a 20th-century model of volunteerism to sustain 21st-century infrastructure.

The causeway won't repair itself, the accessible surface won't stay level without care, and the volunteers — our community's resolute guardians — cannot be expected to shoulder this burden indefinitely.

The Salt Marsh Trail is a testament to what Nova Scotians can achieve. It's time our support systems reflect its true value.

Securing stable, multi-year funding from the federal and provincial governments and forging partnerships with forward-thinking corporations are not just investments in a trail; they are investments in our community's health, accessibility and natural legacy.

Let's ensure this irreplaceable gem is preserved not by chance, but by choice. What can you do to make this happen? Join the CHTPA and see how you can help.

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