

Proposed Motorway Plans To Rip Up Growth Management Plan and Rare Carolinian Habitats
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The Town of Fort Erie has some Ontario's greatest concentration of threatened Carolinian forests. However, this very concentration of rare forests, is seen by the Niagara Regional Council as making it as an excellent location for a proposed massive 60,000 capacity, "NASCAR-like" racing track, know as the Canadian Motorway Speedway. It, and associated light industrial and commercial development, is proposed for an 800 acre site, predominantly designated as "Good General Agricultural", in the Niagara Regional and Fort Erie Official Plans. Some 35% of the site has important designated natural heritage features. These include the Provincially Significant Frenchman's Creek Wetland, and the headwaters of three Provincially Significant Fish habitats.

While the Carolinian Canada Coalition might disagree, the presence of so many rare Carolinian Habitats mixed in with farmland makes it a good candidate for destruction for Niagara Regional Council. It takes the view that since 288 acres of the 800 acres is forests, streams and wetlands, that "the loss of farmland" here "should not have a major impact on the available supply of quality agricultural land in the Niagara Region." This makes it therefore, an excellent cite for a motorway according to Niagara's planners and politicians.

What is tragic is that the very qualities that for Niagara planners make the threatened lands that comprise the headwaters an important recharge area for Miller, Frenchman's and Beaver Creeks along the Onondaga Escarpment great for a motorway, is typical of the good farmlands of Fort Erie generally. Fort Erie was the hometown of Edmund Zavitz, the father of reforestation in Ontario, who encouraged many local farmers to reforest parts of their farms. This has given Fort Erie the best situation outside a native reserve of all of Carolinian Canada of some 46 percent natural habitat. (mix of forests, marsh, regenerating woods). Apparently, this is a

dangerous threat of a good example to be wiped out by what, if it is successful, will be the largest motorway racing speedway in Canada, located at western side of the interchange of Bowen Road and the Queen Elizabeth Expressway.

Although the Niagara Region and Fort Erie have dismissed the agricultural value of the threatened lands a provincial ministerial group has recognized that, “This subject site is predominantly Class One soils and part of a large, contiguous prime agricultural area designated in both the Niagara Region and Town of Fort Erie Official Plans.” They also point out that, “Further, based on the Region’s recent growth plan conformity exercise, it appears that there are ample lands already designated within both the Town and the Region.”

The ministry review has also challenged the determination of the proponent to construct part of the two-mile motorway racing track above a Provincially Significant Wetland. It notes that “vegetation removal will be a necessary impact to facilitate the development. In regards to provincial direction regarding the protection of PSWs (Provincially Significant Wetlands). Policy 2.1.3 of the PPS (Provincial Policy Statement) states that development and site alteration shall not be permitted in significant wetlands. As such, it is not clear how this element of the proposal is consistent with this policy.”

The ministry review (by Municipal Affairs and Housing) stresses the threat posed to Provincially Significant wetlands by the proposal to build the racing track over through a bridge that will require forest destruction and tree removal. It notes how such site alterations are not permitted in provincially significant wetlands. Despite these statements, when the matter was discussed at a December 7th meeting of the Fort Erie Council, developer consultant Rick Brady maintained that permission to do this had been obtained by the local Ministry of Natural Resources biologist Anne Yagi, and that therefore the opinions of the Niagara Peninsula

Conservation Authority against this proposal, should be discarded. This swamp forest which the motorway is attempting to ruin contains a stand of the nationally endangered tree, the Pin Oak.

The Ministry review also notes that there are significant wildlife habitats on the subject lands which have been ignored in the developer's EIS. While this report by Rick Brady claims "that no seasonal concentration areas of wildlife were identified on or adjacent to the subject area", the ministry found that "MNR notes that several features on and adjacent to the subject area have been classified as upland and wetland deer wintering areas- one of the fourteen types of seasonal concentrations of Significant Wildlife Habitat under the Significant Wildlife Habitat Guide." It also found that Brady wrongly listed Flowering Dogwood found on the site "not listed under the Endangered Species Act", while in fact it is.

One of the most threatening aspects of the speedway is that if it were approved the entire watershed of Miller Creek would be encased in an urban zoning, turning into a storm drain, similar to the Don River, the most urbanized and polluted stream in all of Canada. Miller Creek contains a number of Endangered Species, including Grass Pickerel and Wood Turtles, found only 2.4 kilometres downstream from the subject lands. It is a Class One Provincially Significant Fish habitat, and at its mouth downstream in the Niagara River from the site five kilometres and important breeding area for muskellunge. The headwaters area threatened by the proposal is suitable for pike spawning when the creek is in spring flood, although the area has not been sampled.

The developer's EIS dismisses rare species as Bobolink and Meadowlarks because they are considered "locally common." Such uncommon species are common in Fort Erie because of its good, and now threatened, Carolinian habitats. Rare Milk Snakes found on site are similarly is written off since it is a "generalist"- although not so much a generalist to thrive in a racetrack.

To stop the Canadian Motorway Speedway it is important that pressure be brought to the provincial government to appeal the pending re-designation of its subject lands as “Special Policy Area” in the Niagara Regional Plan from its current “Good General Agricultural” designation to the Ontario Municipal Board. Local residents should not be forced to raise the enormous sums on expert witnesses that would be required in an OMB hearing. One of the important reasons for such an appeal is for consistency in the province’s application to the Growth Plan. In Niagara, the province has stood up to developers who want to violate it in West Lincoln and Niagara Falls- why not Fort Erie?

For more details on this issue see the website of the Preservation of Agricultural Lands Society.