

# Hikers, ATV riders struggle to share Musquodoboit trails

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Riders say they maintain trail, walkers say ATVs make hiking unsafe



A jogger takes to the Beechville-Lakeside-Timberlea Trail. This trail built on a former rail line, is one that also allows for cyclists and ATV enthusiasts. Elsewhere people have put up signs and even boulders to make a point about who should be able to use trails.

On a backwoods trail near Musquodoboit Harbour, a dispute is simmering between ATV riders and people who love to walk.

The subject of the quarrel is a 7.2-kilometre section of old railway bed, the Gaetz Brook Connector, which joins a web of trails including the popular Blueberry Run, a large, groomed trail open to all uses: walking, cycling, horseback riding, and ATV driving.

“Everybody is welcome there,” said Jim Crowell, president of the Marine Riders ATV Club, which maintains the Blueberry Run with permission from the Department of Natural Resources.

“There are other trails in the area that are strictly for walking or riding your bicycle. This part (the Gaetz Brook Connector) from the Head of Chezzetcook to Musquodoboit Harbour, has never been developed.”

“In the last 15 years, the ATV club and SATA (Shore Area Active Transportation Association) have both asked for a letter of authority for (the Connector).”

If the trail were in a city, “nobody would argue about it at all,” Crowell said. “But this is a rural area. The residents here have been using (the Connector) as motorized for 45 years. They’ve maintained the trail. They’ve kept it from growing in.”

“Now, the DNR wants to give it to a group who can get funding from government — taxpayer’s money for their own use — to walk along. And the people who live on that trail will be prevented from using it (for ATVs).

“Taxpayer’s money should be used for everybody — for horses, bicycles, dirt bikes, or skidoos — because we all get along, except for the walkers, who don’t want to get along with anybody.”

Patricia Richards is the chair of SATA, the walker’s group that aims to develop the railway bed as a walking trail, to the exclusion of ATVs. The group exists to promote healthy transportation, and the grants that are available to it are earmarked for non-motorized trails only, she said.

“It’s not that we’re advocating for only non-motorized transportation — we also use cars — but we want some balance.”

And she says there are safety concerns.

“This isn’t a roadway. There are no passing lanes,” she said. “It’s difficult to walk, cycle and have wheelchairs and baby carriages on a trail with motorized vehicles.”

The corridor is also intended to become part of the coast-to-coast Trans Canada Trail, which for the most part is non-motorized, Richards said.

“There are some sections of the TCT that still need work, and this is one of them, right here in our community.”

“This corridor between East Chezzetcook and Gaetz Brook has been deemed by the province, through the Department of Natural Resources, to be a non-motorized trail, an active transportation corridor, in other words.”

Richard's assertion that the DNR has agreed to ban ATVs on the trail is misinformation, says Chris Hughes, whose home backs onto it.

“I've lived here for 62 years next to this railway bed. The road that I live on, Pearson Drive, was named after my grandmother. We've always used this little strip of trail to access our cottages.”

“When this walking group put a piece into (a local newspaper) saying that they had finally reached their goal and the trail was going to become for walking only, well, that's the first I heard of it,” Hughes said.

“They said they had been given a letter of authority. I called DNR, who said, no, they hadn't been given a letter of authority — they've applied for a letter of authority. So, what they put in the newspaper was wrong.”

On Tuesday, DNR told The Chronicle Herald that the trail remains open to all users. The department said SATA's request to restrict it is still in “the application process.”

“Of everybody on this railway bed, nobody was consulted,” Hughes said. “It was all done in little meetings. (SATA) said 19 businesses were approached, but from here to the end of the Musquodoboit run, there are three businesses, not 19. So, I don't know what businesses they went to.”

Hughes said that after the dispute flared, SATA sent a questionnaire about the trail to nearby homeowners, asking about such things as picnic tables, but not mentioning its request to restrict motorized vehicles.

“Everybody was outraged,” Hughes said. “So, we wrote on the stupid form, ‘Motorized. Everybody should share.’”

He then developed a petition, which he took to every home that backs onto the trail, except for a few where he “tried three times and they weren’t at home.”

Hughes said 69 people signed the petition.

“Everybody on the railway bed, on Pearson Road — which is about half the trail — except for three people, signed it.”

He also posted more than 100 cardboard signs, similar to election signs, around the neighbourhood, showing an ATV and a pedestrian, with the slogan, “Let’s share. We all pay taxes.”

“Our councillor, David Hendsbee, called me at 7:00 one evening,” Hughes explained. “He said, ‘I was just at a meeting for wellness in Musquodoboit Harbour, and (a woman said) she wanted the signs (on power poles) taken down.’”

“I asked, ‘What’s the reason? Who wants them down?’”

“(Hendsbee) said, ‘SATA, the walking group. A workman could get hurt if he fell and hit himself on one of these signs.’”

“I laughed, and said the last thing I want is any worker in Nova Scotia to be injured on the job site. They’ll be taken down immediately.”

“Councillor Hendsbee said, ‘You don’t have to do it tonight.’”

“I said, ‘No sir, I don’t want that on my conscience.’ So, I got to work that night, and I removed the signs that were on poles, and we relocated them.”

On Monday Hughes gave his petition to MLA Kevin Murphy, who told him it would be read in the legislature in September.

“It’s Canada’s birthday, and we’re all Canadians,” Hughes said. “If we can’t get along and share what we have out in the country, well, there’s something wrong.”

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