

The Caledon Trail

TAKING A HIKE

John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, said it best: "Walking yields a greater closeness to the earth, an independence. The solid thud of boots on the path means freedom to stop and admire a flower, to move at one's own speed, to rejoice in crossing a stream on risky stepping-stones, to explore off the trail, to get a close-up of dew jewelling the grass."¹

And what better place to find that 'closeness to earth' than along one of the numerous municipal trails in Ontario. For the Town of Caledon, it was just a matter of getting on track.

On Track

Caledon is renowned for its gently rolling hills and rural serenity but if it hadn't been for late nineteenth century industrial development, the Caledon Trailway may not have been available for pastoral pursuits today.

In 1877, the Hamilton and Northwestern Railway

opened a freight line from Hamilton to Collingwood to carry stone, timber, cattle and lumber from rural Ontario to the more heavily industrialized cities to the south. Acquired by Canadian National in 1923, the line continued to operate for another fifty-odd years but by 1984 the paths of commerce had shifted and the line from Georgetown to Tottenham was abandoned.

Former rail lines make wonderful trails. Following rivers and shorelines and carving through hidden scenic vistas, the grades are moderate, the bridges over streams and rivers are in place and the subgrade is more than adequate to withstand the wear and tear of hiking boots and cross-country skis.

In 1989, the town of Caledon acquired the 36-kilometre long, 20 metre wide right of way from CN for the bargain sum of \$60,000, a cost of just under \$350 an acre.

1 From Hike Ontario's Fact Sheet





Acquiring the land was relatively simple. Opening the trail was a bit more of a struggle. It took three years of debate, with residents packing town hall meetings and firing off numerous letters to the editor of the local paper, to decide just who could use the trail. In the end, however, an overwhelming if not altogether unanimous consensus was reached. Motorized vehicles would not be allowed. A volunteer committee with representatives from the public and the town's staff and politicians was set up to establish design guidelines.

Developing the Trail

In 1877, railway builders had more on their minds than the natural beauty of the hills and the valleys that lay in their path but the Hamilton and Northwestern Railway could not have picked a more ideal place to situate its line.

The right-of-way follows the Niagara escarpment, skirts along the Credit River and crosses the southern tip of the Oak Ridges Moraine. You walk past gravel terraces, across rivers and swamps, and through beautiful hardwood forests. And there is, of course, an abundance of wildlife – everything from snapping turtles and beavers to deer and coyote.

“You really have to walk the trail to appreciate just how beautiful and varied the landscape is in this part of Ontario,” says Brian Baird, a landscape architect and project coordinator for the Town of Caledon.

In 1991, the town started to develop the 36-kilometre trail from Terra Cotta in the southwest to just past Palgrave in the northeast. The path width and clearance heights were set at 4 metres; dimensions specifically selected to meet the standards needed for horses and riders. The paths were cleared, graded and, in places, screened; signs erected along the trail; and gateways built at road crossings to block motorized vehicles. Primary access points were located in each of the five villages (Terra Cotta, Cheltenham, Inglewood, Caledon East and Palgrave) that make up the Town of Caledon.

Since the Hamilton and Northwestern line made stops at all the villages along the way, the trail designers used the four and five acre parcels of land on which the stations had stood to create

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INSIGHT

In 1975, there were over 97,000 kms of rail lines in operation in Canada. By 1998, that figure had dropped to 73,000 kms. In Ontario about 60 abandoned rail lines have been converted into almost 2,000 kilometres of trails.

Under the Transportation Act of 1996, railways must offer discontinued rail lines for sale to private short line companies. If there is no interest, the rail company must offer the lines to the federal, provincial and municipal governments before it can discontinue operations. If no purchase agreement is reached with governments, operations will be discontinued and other offers can be considered.

For more information on trails in Canada, check out:

- The Ontario Trails Council (www.ontariotrails.on.ca), a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the creation, development, preservation, management, and use of recreational trails in Ontario.
- Go For Green (www.goforgreen.ca), a national non-profit, charitable organization encouraging Canadians to pursue healthy, outdoor physical activities while being good environmental citizens. Go For Green's TrailPaq (www.trailpaq.ca) profiles national, provincial and municipal trails and provides information on seed funding available to community trail groups in Canada.
- Hike Ontario (www.hikeontario.com) is a non-profit organization representing the interests of Ontario walkers and hikers.

At the Joint OGRA/ROMA 2002 Annual Conference, a workshop was held on Municipal Trails that explored the opportunities, challenges and benefits of developing recreational trails in municipalities.

The speakers included: Brian Baird, Project Coordinator for Caledon; Cindy Cassidy, Manager, Eastern Ontario Trails Alliance; Paul Wyatt, Director-at-Large, Ontario Trail Council. Copies of their presentations can be obtained by contacting Lauren Ryan at OGRA at lauren@ogra.org.



The Caledon Trail Taking a Hike

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parks. In fact, since the Caledon Trailway is a link in the TransCanada Trail (the longest trail in the world winding almost 18,000 kilometres from Newfoundland to BC), the Caledon East station park has the distinction of having the first TransCanada Trail Pavilion, opened in July 1996.

Acquiring the land in 1989 was only the first step in developing the trail and the initial cost of \$60,000 only the first capital investment that the town has made. Over the past decade, Caledon has spent another \$540,000 on improvements, clearing the trail, building paths, erecting signs and developing the station parks. Baird estimates that it will take another million dollars to upgrade the trail and to build a pedestrian bridge over the increasingly busy 5-lanes of Highway 10. Maintenance costs, however, are relatively low – about \$20,000 a year or less than \$600 a kilometre.

Today, during the warm summer months, over 1,500 people a week run, stroll, bike and ride along the trail. It has also become a favourite trail for those on horseback. This is after all, horse country, says Baird, and horses and hikers co-exist quite happily. Unlike the problem with dogs, horse manure breaks down quite readily and actually makes a good natural fertilizer.

About three years ago, the town held a new round of public meetings to develop a master plan for the Caledon trails although Baird says, these were much less contentious. “The experience with the Caledon Trailway has really set the public’s mind at ease. They seem very comfortable with what we have done and what we are planning to do.”

Caledon is not lacking in trails. It has over 263 kilometres of trails but, Baird says, there is still room to expand the network.

“The Caledon Trail is a great east-west spine. Now we have to look at a north-south route. Our population is

growing rapidly and that's expected to continue as the baby boomers start looking for retirement. There aren't any more rail lines likely to come free so we have to get the corridors from the developers before they are lost."

"Planning is the key - knowing what you want, where you want to go and how you are going to pay for it." ○

