

Public Consultation Former Rail Corridor– Head of Chezzetcook to Gaetz Brook

Summary Report
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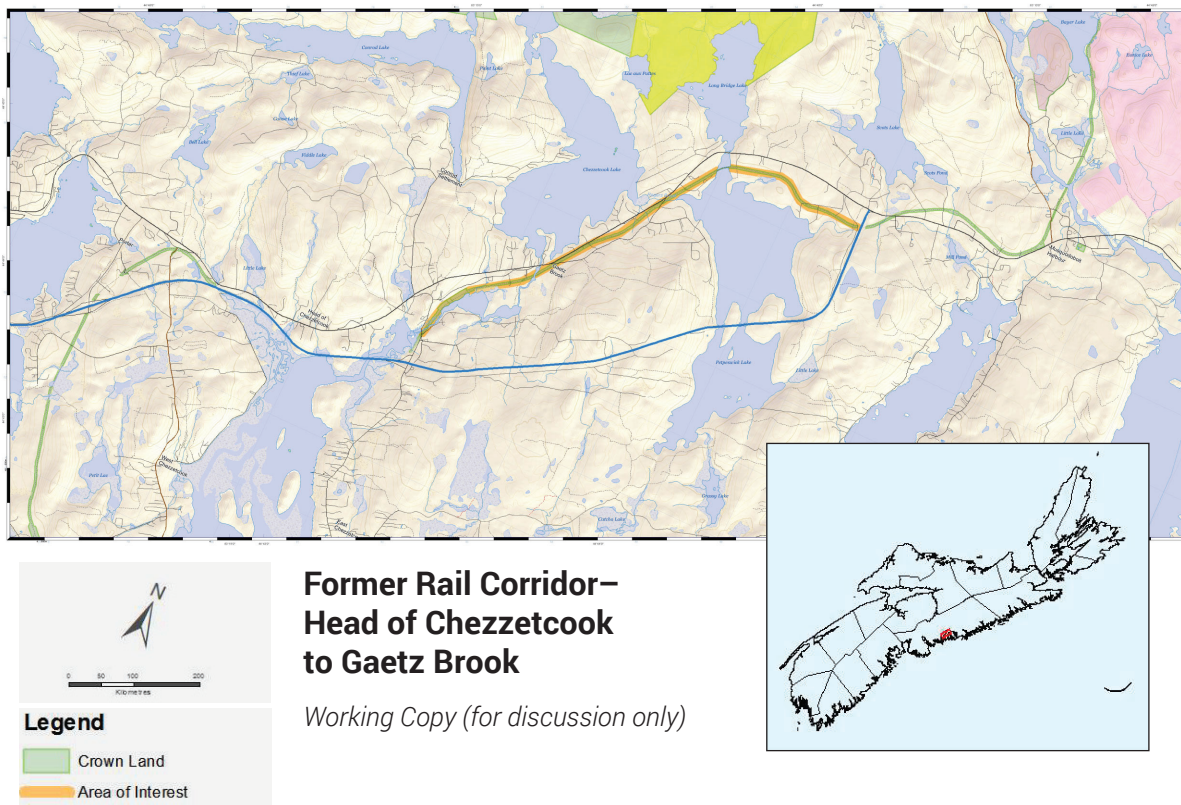
Summary Report

Two community based trail organizations have expressed conflicting interests in developing a section of the Crown owned former rail corridor between Chezzetcook and Gaetz Brook, Halifax Regional Municipality. The section of former rail is an undeveloped 10 km tract of Crown land that is part of the 1200 km plus provincial Rail to Trails system. (Figure 1)

A decision on appropriate use of the corridor is required before proceeding with the Letter of Authority to develop the trail.

Past efforts to design and implement a trail development and management plan for this undeveloped section of former rail corridor have not been successful given a difference in opinion with respect to development and use of the corridor. This has been an ongoing discussion for the last decade with a distinct division between that could not be resolved even through formal mediation.

Given the history and complexity of the issue, the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage sought assistance to create the right engagement framework that was both neutral and transparent to capture perspectives from stakeholder groups that they may not have previously heard from on this issue.



It is important to note that this consultation was designed to create an opportunity for targeted, focused discussions with the business community, services community and joint Halifax Regional Municipality and Provincial NS Department stakeholder groups. Stakeholder trail groups were also afforded an opportunity to participate in the consultation in a parallel process.

Subsequent consultations will occur as a part of the LOA application process to gather insight from impacted groups such as adjacent landowners. In this way, the successful proponent can hear concerns first hand and make plans to address them in their development plans.

The design of the public consultation was based on experience and sound engagement strategies. The conversations took place as focus groups, in-person and phone interviews. All engagement activities were framed within the same inquiry context (same questions).

Over the course of two weeks, three different stakeholder groups asking a series of interactive questions to gauge their value perception of a community trail (developed from the former rail corridor) including required amenities, motivators and deterrents. What emerged was not surprising, but gratifying from a public consultation perspective, as the feedback was rich and meaningful, with natural patterns emerging across all groups.

The consultations were successful as we could glean perspectives and insights from the targeted stakeholder groups and integrate them into a “What We Heard” findings report, designed to inform an inter-departmental working group to craft recommendations around appropriate trail use.

The Consultation

The consultations were designed against previous global experience and IAP2 standards for public consultation which include core values associated with meaningful stakeholder engagement, sustainability of decision making, process integrity and community.

An inter-departmental working group consisting of staff from DNR, and DCCH was formed to oversee the process as it was designed and led by PONO Consultants International Inc.

The desired approach was to design focused consultations with targeted stakeholder groups as opposed to one larger public meeting to ensure both process and information integrity but also to create meaningful forums to allow for these stakeholders to share their perspectives on the value of a community trail from the former rail corridor. Several engagement strategies were utilized including focus groups, in person and phone interviews to ensure depth of response.

Three stakeholder catchment groups were identified that informed the creation of a participant list and the design of the overall consultation approach. These catchment groups are the business community, the community service providers and Municipal and Provincial government departments with trail use or management as part of their mandate. A parallel write-in consultation was used to gather input from community trail stakeholder groups.

All stakeholder groups were asked to respond to the same questions. Specifically,

1. What is the value to your organization in having a community trail?
2. What would motivate you to use it?
3. What amenities would be essential?
4. What would deter you from using a trail?

“What We heard”

The consultations yielded rich insight into how this community values a trail in their area. It is very clear the community would like to see the former rail corridor established as a trail and maintained.

A summary of the responses to the questions from the catchment groups and the trail groups are summarized as follows:

1. What is the value to your organization in having a community trail?

- Active trail opportunities for all community members as a safe place to walk, bicycle, snowshoe and cross country ski.
- Families with young children in strollers
- Children needing a safe route to school
- Seniors and individuals with disabilities seeking flat, secure trails that can be managed with wheelchairs or walkers
- AT plan specifies a “greenway” connection from Chezzetcook to Musquodoboit Harbour
- If we are to spend money spend it so all our citizens can use it. One trail for all to use.
- ...whole community to be able to use the trail. This being OHV use, Equestrian use, walkers, hikers, mountain bike or any bike with wide tires designed for trail use. This gets the whole community involved.
- probably wouldn’t use it all that much because it is dead ended at both ends.we would still like to have access to it.
- Youth and adults have access to MetroX Express Bus to connect with work and recreation opportunities in Cole Harbour, Dartmouth or Halifax.

2. What would motivate you to use it (the trail)?

- Safe
- Non-motorized
- Flat and hard packed,
- Environmentally sensitive and sustainable,
- Conveniently and easily accessible year-round to persons of all ages, abilities and abilities.
- ATV users love to use trails. Year-round, rain or sleet or snow or shine or anything else that “mother nature” can throw our way - and we do a pretty bang-up job of cleaning up after her when things get rough.

3. What amenities would be essential?

- 3.5 m wide surface, flat and compacted to accommodate people in wheelchairs, people with disabilities and baby carriages
- a 5 m wide buffer to all adjacent landowners.
- Signage.. Maps at the trail heads, safety signage, plus location signage for visitors and tourists; interpretive signs

- Benches, look offs, bicycle racks and picnic shelters, washrooms
- The local gas station and fill up our trucks, ATV's and spare jerry-cans.
We go to the local grocery store/merchant
- Not many for the ATV / OHV crowd. We're pretty self-sufficient.
- Gates.

4. What would deter you from using a trail?

- Unsafe, fragmented trail
- Deterred by shared use motorized use, in particular aggressive OHV users and noise from motorized vehicles on the trail.
- Giving the trail to a non-motorized group and making it a non-motorized trail that effectively bans law-abiding ATV owners from using it.

It was expressed across all three catchment groups:

- The trail must be well-groomed and safe for users.
- Participants in this process felt strongly that there are safety issues having motorized vehicles on this trail
- Participants expressed value in having a community trail to promote physical activity, socialization, and community connectivity, as well as increasing business and attracting new community members, socialization opportunities for families and pets and connectivity across communities.
- Amenities identified: accessibility, maintenance, signage (distance, way finding and interpretative), controlled dog use (on leash), non-motorized use, benches, rest areas, trash cans, bathrooms and signage as well a managed access and monitoring to ensure users follow established rules.
- Gaetz Brook Junior High - The Royal Canadian Legion in Gaetz Brook is designated as emergency muster Station for students. However, the former rail corridor to reach the Legion is considered unpassable. This section of trail should have priority.

It was clear across all stakeholder groups that they saw the benefit of having a trail to promote physical activity and community connectivity. It was also clear that all participants shared concerns associated with allowing motorized use as, in their perspectives, this would pose safety issues to walkers, runners, hikers, cyclists and pets.

With respect to what would deter using a trail, there were commonalities in response for that category as well including not sharing a trail with motorized vehicles, having dogs off leash, and an unmaintained trail.

Trends organically emerged naturally across all stakeholder categories through the various session conversations, which lends to assumption that the patterns of response are true and authentic representation of the community's perspective related to developing the former rail corridor into a trail.

Those contributing to the consultation, although still very hopeful for a resolution and an operating trail, demonstrated the community doubts that anything might come of "yet another consultation" on the former rail corridor. A process lasting over decades can lead to participation apathy.