

## Province designates new wilderness area

### Land west of Halifax is 20 times larger than Point Pleasant Park

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The protected area is accessible by public transit.

The province is protecting a piece of wilderness in Halifax's western suburbs that's 20 times larger than Point Pleasant Park.

The Tory government announced yesterday it's designating 1,350 hectares (3,350 acres) bounded by Timberlea, Rockingham and Hammonds Plains as the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area.

"It will be preserved forever for people to explore, study and enjoy nature," Environment Minister Mark Parent said. "City dwellers will actually be able to take a bus to a protected wilderness area."

Environmental advocates and members of the community have been fighting for years to protect the Crown land, which is surrounded by fast-developing communities with a population of about 100,000. Chris Miller of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society said he's proud to be from a

city and a province that's willing to protect such an outstanding wilderness area.

"This is an asset most cities in North America lost long ago," Miller said, "and an asset most cities would love to have back."

Ray Plourde of the Ecology Action Centre called it a "wonderful gift" to the city and its citizens.

The tentative boundaries - which can be changed before cabinet makes them final - leave some Crown land on the area's northwestern boundary unprotected. That could become a corridor for proposed Highway 113, which would link Highway 102 near the Hammonds Plains Road and Highway 103 just west of Timberlea.

Halifax Clayton Park Liberal Diana Whalen said the compromise protects about 80 per cent of the available Crown land.

"That's still a victory," she said.

Whalen, who tried to protect the area three years ago through a Liberal bill, said Highway 113 is many years away from construction. The debate over that road is not over.

Whalen said she hopes the province and Halifax Regional Municipality will be able to acquire adjoining lands on Quarry Lake and Susie's Lake from private landowners.

On a hike into the new wilderness area, Miller said the most important ecological areas are already within the proposed boundaries. Blue Mountain Hill, the highest point on the Chebucto Peninsula, is saved from development. Highway 113 proponents once hoped to flatten it for road ballast.

But some of the most accessible areas are around Susie's Lake, where development remains possible.

The wilderness area has 17 lakes and almost 100 wetlands. People hiking and canoeing through the area sometimes report sightings of endangered mainland moose, Miller said.

"When you're in the lakes, you don't see any of the development that's in the city," Miller said. "You get a true wilderness experience."

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