

## Road to ruin

**Just beyond Bayers Lake Industrial Park lies a patch of wilderness which could turn into a highway. Tim Bousquet reports.**

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by Tim Bousquet

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Making waves Activists say people need to "come out and see what's at stake." photo Tim Bousquet

"We're standing in the middle of an old growth red spruce forest," says Chris Miller. "The oldest trees are probably about 150 years old."

Miller orients himself, moves a few metres farther down a rough trail, and comes to a stop.

"Right here. This would be the centre of the highway."

We're in the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes wilderness, a chunk of undisturbed land the size of the Halifax peninsula just minutes from downtown. Miller grew up nearby, went away to earn a Ph.D. in Ecology from the University of Waterloo, and now regularly gives tours of the wilderness.

"The only way we're going to save this is to have people come out and see what's at stake," he says.

The mostly provincially owned BMBCL is staggering in the breadth of its environmental and recreational assets: 22 lakes, nine of which form a canoe loop; habitat for bear and endangered moose; old growth forest stands; rare arctic flora; 150 bird species; and Blue Mountain itself, a granite outcrop providing a panoramic view of tens of thousands of acres.

And it's all just a stone's throw away. Buses 21 and 52 go practically to the start of one of the trails Miller uses to show off the wilderness, behind the Kent store in the Bayers Lake Industrial Park. Within 20 minutes, we're at the boulder-strewn shore of the lake. "You really can't find a better swimming place," he says.

Miller is working with local environmental, hiking and sporting groups to urge the province to designate the 4,300 acres of crown land in BMBCL as "wilderness," which would prohibit it being sold or traded to private interests, as has already happened to about 1,000 acres.

Backers of the BMBCL fear still more land could be lost through controversial "Orders in Council"—cabinet-level decisions made in secret, without public consultation or notification.

"The community really cares about what happens with this public land, yet we have no input, and we find out about it weeks later," says Diana Whalen, Liberal MLA for Clayton Park and author last year of a private members bill designating BMBCL as wilderness. That bill died without action.

"These cabinet decisions—they're bullshit," says Bill Estabrooks, the Timberlea NDP MLA. "We're always playing catch-up, because [the ruling Conservative Party] doesn't have the courage to do it up front, in front of the community groups."

The proposed Provincial Highway 113—connecting Highways 102 and 103, roughly from Bedford to Timberlea—would split BMBCL almost exactly in two.

Whalen and Estabrooks have reason to be touchy about the issue. The 113 proposal initially called for slicing off the top of Blue Mountain and using it as fill for the highway. The Department of Transportation has since dropped that idea, but current plans still have the roadway straddling the lower flanks of the hill.

BMBCL supporters won a small victory last month when the province agreed that the environmental sensitivity of the land called for a full-blown "Class 2" environmental assessment—the strictest possible—before the highway project can be approved. But wilderness designation for the BMBCL is not on the provincial agenda, and the land could still end up in the hands of developers.

Back at Susie Lake, Miller sits astride a boulder, and gestures towards a half-dozen tree-lined coves dotting the shoreline opposite.

"You know there are people who would love to build houses all along there, and the public wouldn't be able to use it," he says, pausing to let the mental image of suburbia imposing itself on the lake sink in. "I'm trying to stop that from happening."