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# THE PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER

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## Kawartha Highlands

### Examiner Staff

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**Editorials** - While the birth of any new provincial park is a milestone in provincial history, the unique conception and difficult labour that preceded the arrival of the Kawartha Highlands Signature Site Park make it particularly welcome.

Kawartha Highlands is not a wilderness park by any stretch of the imagination. Within its borders are 1,400 cottages, several commercial businesses, a variety of hunt camps and a hatchwork of snowmobile and ATV trails.

It will not offer a complete escape from the motorized, mechanized urban world. Power boats and float planes will continue to operate on many lakes, hunters and anglers will be able to use snowmobiles and ATVs to get to their favourite spots.

It will, however, be a provincial park. That status was threatened just a year ago. As a result, there will be limits on where those motorized vehicles can go and where guns can be fired. New development will be severely restricted. Campsites, canoe portages and walking trails will be upgraded and monitored.

Each of those "wills" and "won'ts" represents a compromise in what has been a three-year battle over the future of Kawartha Highlands. Many of the compromises were small, which makes the length of time it took to work them out seem excessive. However, the fact that compromise has been reached and Premier Ernie Eves was able to announce this week that a formal framework for the establishment of the park has been agreed on validates the process.

To understand why compromise was necessary and how little room separated the various interest groups involved, we have to go back three years. That's when a committee was appointed to canvass public opinion and recommend whether the 35,000 hectare area – which spreads north more than 30 kilometres from Buckhorn and Burleigh Falls, covering much of the lakeland between highways 28 and 507 – would become a provincial park or a less-regulated conservation area.

When the committee endorsed a full, operating provincial park, many cottage and business owners objected. So did people who had always hunted, fished and trapped in the area. They feared they would lose their private property rights and traditional uses and eventually be forced out altogether.

It did no good for committee members to deny any such motives. They had in fact recommended hunting, fishing, trapping and limited snowmobiling and ATV use could continue, but park opponents didn't trust that those activities would be protected in law. Nor did they see adequate protection for private property rights and future use of roads and road allowances.

There was a dangerous blip in the process last fall when Minister of Natural Resources Gerry Ouellette arbitrarily threw out the committee's recommendations and invented a new designation for the site – conservation reserve. Ouellette's proposal essentially returned the area to the status quo, enshrining property rights but doing little to help establish park uses. The committee members and parks supporters were outraged and promised to fight back.

In April, Eves wisely tossed out Ouellette's plan and assigned MPP Chris Hodgson, a former minister of natural resources, to arbitrate a settlement. The result was released this week, a charter that codifies how the park will operate.

The document is skillfully put together. It establishes the Highlands as an operating park under the Provincial Parks Act, but includes several provisions outside the standard parks management style. And it stipulates that where the Kawartha Highlands Legislation and the Parks Act disagree, the legislation will prevail.

That would appear to be a key part of the language. It reflects very closely what the committee had originally recommended, but gives legal weight to the concerns of the other side. Another important inclusion is that any "significant" changes in the parks management agreement will be subject to public notice and comment.

However, not everything about the charter is so above-board. Premier Eves proudly announced it will prohibit mining with the park, which is accurate only in the narrowest interpretation. One working aggregate pit and several other aggregate claim areas are in the south-west corner of the park. They are surrounded by park land, but the charter excludes them from being considered part of the park. The official park map shows the active mine as "forest reserve" and the claim areas as "proposed forest reserve" – an exquisite example of double-speak.

Given their location at the edge of the park, existing legal status and the relatively tiny amount of space involved, allowing those mines to operate is a legitimate compromise. Attempting to hide them is questionable behaviour, but that's politics.

Far more important is that a provincial park has been established in a semi-wilderness area that has long been a popular, if lightly-used, public camping and canoeing area. Rather than being overrun in the future by increasing and uncontrolled use, it will be preserved and protected so future generations can get a sample of the real outdoors only a few hours from Ontario's heaviest urban sprawl.

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