

Cutting begins on Beaver Pond Forest construction site

BY DON BUTLER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JANUARY 31, 2011 9:51 PM



Steve Hulaj, president of the Kanata lakes Community Association, was among a small but passionate group of protesters at the Beaver Pond Forest in Kanata (Ottawa) today, Monday, January 31, 2011. Today was the first day of a tree-cutting operation, an operation which has been opposed by the protesters. More details to follow. Goulbourn Forced Road, between Kanata Rd. and Terry Fox Dr.

Photograph by: Mike Carrocetto, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — As heavy equipment began felling trees in Kanata's Beaver Pond Forest Monday, one of the landowners said his big mistake was allowing members of the public to use the property for recreational purposes.

"Over the years, the public has built trails. They've had free use of the land for 30 years," said Lyon Sachs, the 85-year-old president of Urbandale Construction, which bought the forest land with partner Richcraft in 1999. "Had we not done that, nobody would have said a word.

"We assumed we were doing something good for the public," Sachs said. "Now we're finding that maybe we didn't something so good, because people have a certain affection for this land."

KNL, a partnership of the two development firms, plans to build 400 townhouses and single-family homes on the property in northwestern Kanata, under an agreement struck with the former city of Kanata 30 years ago to preserve part of the land and develop part of it.

Environmental activists and neighbours argue that the forest on the site should be preserved for ecological and heritage reasons.

The company brought in security guards Monday morning to keep people off the site. But near Goulbourn Forced Road on the property's western edge, the sound of heavy equipment cutting trees could clearly be heard. Another large piece of heavy cutting equipment arrived about 2 p.m.

Sachs said clear-cutting of about 70 per cent of the 40-hectare site should be complete before winter ends. "It's days and weeks, not months."

News of the cutting prompted a group of about a dozen opponents to gather in frigid weather at the forest's edge, some carrying signs reading, "Stop the killing" and "Ask me why I won't buy from Urbandale and Richcraft."

Steve Hulaj, president of the Kanata Lakes Community Association, said that by allowing the cutting to proceed, the City of Ottawa was being "completely disrespectful" of Algonquin chiefs, who consider the land to be sacred.

But in an interview at Urbandale's offices, Sachs said the "mantra" that the land is sacred is "totally artificial."

"What made it sacred?" he asked. "They found a bunch of stones in a circle and said, 'Look, it could be a medicine wheel.' In actual fact, it's a boundary stone."

Sachs said the project's opponents initially claimed the forest was full of old-growth trees up to 300 years old. But a forester hired by KNL investigated and concluded that the trees are between 50 and 70 years old. "There's no old growth in there at all." The land was once farmed, Sachs said.

Opponents also claimed that displaced animals would be prevented from migrating to adjacent woodlands by species already established there, a statement Sachs described as "ludicrous."

Then "out of the blue," he said, those fighting to preserve the forest asserted there were archeological artifacts on the site despite a 2003 assessment to the contrary by Nick Adams, an archeologist hired by KNL. His findings were accepted by Ontario's Ministry of Tourism and Culture in 2004.

The company had planned to start cutting in mid-January, and even had heavy equipment on the property, but agreed to delay for two weeks to allow the Algonquins of Ontario to review Adams' assessment and several studies of nearby sites.

When that review concluded last week there was a "high potential" for finding aboriginal artifacts in the area, the Algonquins of Ontario asked KNL to further delay cutting to allow more archeological surveying.

But Sachs said the Ministry of Tourism and Culture asked the company to do the cutting in the winter

when the ground is frozen to minimize the danger of damage to any artifacts that may be on the site, though he added: "We don't believe for one minute that there's something down there."

In a memo to council Monday, John Moser, general manager of the city's planning and growth management department, said there were "no new issues" identified in the Algonquins of Ontario report. The Ministry of Tourism and Culture provides direction in archeological matters to municipalities, he said, and the city remains bound by its approval of the assessment done by Adams.

Sachs said if those asking for a delay to allow more archeological study are sincere, "then cutting the trees does not affect that." The project's opponents are welcome to check the site for artifacts in the spring, he said, when the trees are down, but before any blasting starts.

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