

Date: October 27, 2006

To: NCC Mandate Review Panel

From: Poets' Pathway Committee

By e-mail
nccmandate@tc.gc.ca

Dear Panel Members:

The Poets' Pathway Committee is a committee of the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital ("the Alliance") and the Ottawa Literary Heritage Society (OLHS). Dr. Steven Artelle for the OLHS and I for the Alliance are its co-chairs. This brief addresses the Panel's question about the NCC's Functions and Activities, and specifically "the NCC's role in planning, programming and maintaining and developing the Capital."

We are very taken by the project we propose and are convinced that it is supportive of the National Capital Commission's mandate. It would provide huge payback in terms of culture, art, history, diversity, national unity, tourism, the environment and the health of local residents. We wish to convince you to recommend that the Commission enter into constructive discussions with the Committee to further the realization of the Pathway and to reverse the surplus status of a portion of the Southern Corridor with the intent of dedicating it as a "Canadian Poets' Park."

Background

In May 2002, at the first annual meeting of the Commission's Directors with interest groups, the Alliance presented the concept of a Poets' Pathway in Ottawa. This would be a continuous 30-km pathway from Britannia Bay, along the valleys of the Pinecrest and Nepean Creeks, across the Rideau River through the Southern Corridor including McCarthy Woods, then north along the Eastern Corridor including Pleasant Park Woods, and finally along the Rideau River and Beechwood Avenue to Beechwood Cemetery. With the exception of the "urban" segment of Beechwood Avenue, this trajectory is strictly along either existing or planned recreational pathways.

With this route through some of Ottawa's most precious natural areas, the Poets' Pathway aims to commemorate Canada's poets and specifically the Confederation Poets and the members of Quebec's *Mouvement littéraire* who thrived at Ottawa in the late 19th century. This congregation of poets fulfilled a desire of the Fathers of Confederation to develop Ottawa as a centre of literary activity in the new nation. A strong sense of place and communion with nature dominated their work. At various points the proposed route would

offer ample opportunity to bring their imagery to the attention of Canadians, as well as make connections with contemporary poetry and the Aboriginal poetic tradition. The three anchors of the route are:

- * Beechwood Cemetery, where many of the luminaries of Confederation lie buried as are a number of celebrated contemporary poets;
- * McCarthy Woods and the adjacent meadow, which is the closest landscape still available that inspired Archibald Lampman's last poem, "Winter Uplands;" and
- * Britannia Bay at the Ottawa River, near where the Algonquin people met Samuel de Champlain – a body of water that has inspired Euro-Canadian writers ever since.

Additional descriptions and justifications may be found in our April 2002 brief, which is attached.

Our modest request for an agreement in principle, that then could lead to next steps such as development of a business plan and of further support nation-wide, was denied.

Recent Developments

We had more success with the Beechwood Cemetery Foundation. Early in 2005, a subcommittee of the Poets' Pathway Committee (including Cemetery management) began work on creating "Poet's Hill" on a prime site at the Cemetery, with a magnificent view of Parliament Hill. While much of the venue remains to be completed, the Parliamentary Poet Laureate inaugurated the site last September. As well, through a series of "Dead Poets Live" events over the past year, Poet's Hill and Beechwood Cemetery have begun to establish a place in the literary life of the Capital.

In May 2005, the Committee returned to the Commission's Directors, proposing specifically that a portion of the Southern Corridor be preserved as parkland. (Our brief is attached.) We focused on this component of the Pathway, not only because it is a prime anchor of the concept but also because this NCC property is once again "in play." In the late 1990s strong controversy had arisen over proposals to build housing on much of the meadow to the west of the Woods. When, in May 2003, Ottawa City Council designated a portion of the meadow as well as certain other Southern Corridor property as Major Open Space in its Official Plan, the Commission appealed this decision to the Ontario Municipal Board. (The case is still pending.)

In 1988, most of the Southern Corridor lands had been declared surplus to the NCC's mandate. Our proposal would designate the 58-ha meadow to the west of McCarthy Woods as a "Canadian Poets' Park." In addition to the reference to Lampman's "Winter Uplands," other points of inspiration at this site include the exquisite view of the Rideau River

celebrated in Alfred Garneau's poem "La Rivière" and a glimpse of the Peace Tower. References abound in Canadian poetry, and in that of the Confederation Poets in particular, to woods and meadows, landscapes and sunsets in the western sky. More than anywhere else, the sense of place that these poets and others exuded is available if this area is preserved as open space.

We were further encouraged in our proposal by the NCC's finding that its inventory of thematic commemorations in the Capital found only one example in the category Intellectual & Cultural Life – thanks to the inclusion of Sports in this group, which allowed staff to count Maurice Richard's statue in Gatineau.

We again did not receive a positive response. In a formal reply, the Chairman called our proposal for a Poets' Pathway "very interesting" but then went on to suggest that such an outdoor route be located in the core area as that is where most of the tourists go. As for the Southern Corridor, he affirmed the surplus status of the land, except for the 39-ha Woods and a 19-ha parcel along the Rideau River. Anywhere else, a corridor for an east-west pathway is all that would be preserved.

Why our proposal supports the NCC's mandate

We submit to you that the Commission's response to our proposals fails to have due regard to its role of planning and programming the Capital for the enrichment of the cultural and social fabric of Canada. Please consider:

- * The Pathway would communicate to Canadians an important element of the vision of Ottawa as a literary Canada – a vision that encompasses our English and French as well as Aboriginal cultures.
- * Evocation of the Capital's natural landscapes, and creation of opportunities to commune with nature, would be the most suitable commemoration of the historic congregation of these cultures in the course of nation building. The appropriate experience calls for walks through nature, not along Confederation Boulevard in the downtown core.
- * Today and increasingly in the future, tourists seek more than "covering the highlights" in their urban visits. Walking, skating, cycling, wheelchairs or skiing through natural landscapes, with suitable thematic references to Canada's literary heritage, would be a highly attractive activity for a significant number of visitors to the Capital, as well as for its residents. Nothing could better tell of poetry and literature in Canada, while being true to local history.
- * Statistics Canada reports that one million visits to Ottawa each year are cultural in nature. Across the country, six in ten Canadians visit a historic or analogous cultural site in a

given year. A Poets' Pathway and Canadian Poets' Park would add a destination of interest for cultural visitation to Ottawa, attractive in all seasons.

- * The assignment of the Southern Corridor to the status of surplus to the NCC's mandate and the cold shoulder given to the proposed Pathway are therefore deeply inappropriate. The concept most clearly offers an opportunity to tell Canada's story to Canadians, here in the Capital. This is at the core of the NCC's mandate.
- * The Community Foundation of Ottawa has recently accepted the Poets' Pathway project as eligible for funding under its Sustainability Fund. This offers the prospect of financing, including obtaining matching funds for other grant applications.
- * Ottawa's 20/20 Heritage plan, adopted by City Council in April 2003, directs staff to "Work with the NCC ... to ensure that on NCC lands and along recreational pathways commemoration of local individuals, places, events and structures are developed, maintained and improved, and additional themes introduced, e.g., Poets' Pathway." Section 4.6.5 of the Official Plan similarly encourages the development of pathways as providing "connections among communities and major tourism, cultural heritage and greenspace features."
- * As an indication of popular support, on September 10, 2006 the *Ottawa Citizen* published a major article on the Pathway, calling the proposal "a celebration of natural and literary legacy, gloriously entwined."
- * A study of Urban Natural Areas accepted by Ottawa City Council found that about two-thirds of the meadow to the west of McCarthy Woods is prime feeding habitat for raptors. (A small study to verify this finding has apparently taken place this summer. The public has not been provided with the terms of reference for the study, let alone been offered to provide input; we understand that the report is not yet final.)
- * The Alliance is a member of the Coalition for NCC Renewal. The Coalition recommends that all so-called non-NILM lands be subjected to a detailed and comprehensive examination of their value in the life of the community. The Coalition also notes that, over the past 14 years, net proceeds from land sales have averaged over \$11 million per year, nearly double the corporate plan objective.

For all these reasons the Poets' Pathway Committee respectfully suggests that you recommend to the Minister that the Commission be directed to enter into constructive discussions about our proposal and that the surplus status of the Southern Corridor lands be reversed.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment.

Erwin Dreessen, Ph.D.
45 Confederation Private
Ottawa, Ontario K1V 9W6
E-mail: erwin_dreessen@ncf.ca

Enclosures (all in PDF except as noted):

- April 8, 2002 Brief to the NCC Board of Directors
- May 3, 2005 Brief to the NCC Board of Directors
- June 21, 2005 Reply by Marcel Beaudry, Chairman
- Janice Kennedy, "The First Step on the Poets' Pathway," *Ottawa Citizen*, September 10, 2006" (text); idem, photographic image (in JPG)

cc: Dr. Steven Artelle
Carol Gudz, Interim Chair, Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital