

Battle brewing over gravel pit

» Bridge Keepers group goes on the offensive to counter company's bid for license

By: Steve Kannon | Posted: December 13, 2008

Nobody welcomes a gravel pit with open arms. With every application comes some kind of opposition – some more than others. You can put the bid for a large pit near West Montrose into the “battle brewing” category.

Concerned about the impact on the settlement's quaint lifestyle centered on the historic covered bridge, a group calling itself the Bridge Keepers has begun rallying the community to fight. Guelph-based Capital Paving wants to extract aggregate from a 115-acre site near the intersection of Letson Drive and Kathleen Street.

The best defence is a good offence, maintains organizer Tony Dowling, who's employed the Internet as part of an aggressive marketing strategy against the proposed operation. “You have to work hard – the field is pretty heavily tipped in favour of the applicants,” he said in an interview, noting communities typically get short shrift when it comes to gravel pits.

The group is concentrating on the potential negative impacts on one of Woolwich Township's major tourism draws, the kissing bridge, its 127-year history and the rural flavour exemplified by the Mennonite population.

“Lots of visitors come here to see the bridge. There's a great panoramic view of the scene from Jigs Hollow Road that people just love. This (the pit) will ruin the whole experience.”

Bridge Keepers is working up an entire campaign to help bring officials on side.

The application process is underway with both the Ministry of Natural Resources, which licenses gravel pits, and the township, which must grant a zone change to allow the operation on what is currently farmland.

Having deemed Capital Paving's initial application incomplete, the township is now waiting on the company to provide more information before proceeding with a review of the project. And just this week, it added a sub-watershed study to its list of requirements to determine the impact on the groundwater and surrounding geology, explained Dan Kennaley, Woolwich's director of engineering and planning.

“This might constitute a significant delay for Capital Pavement,” as the study typically must go through four seasons.

For its part, Capital Paving expects to carry out many studies to show why the pit should

be located at the West Montrose location. The company is sensitive to community concerns, and wants to minimize the impact of its operation at the site, said representative George Lourenco.

The company has seen an extraordinary amount of feedback from this proposal, much more than what he's seen with other applications.

"With this one, there's been quite a bit of concern – about the bridge, the tourism impact, the Mennonite [traffic]."

Although the pit would be larger than many in the area, it would still be smaller than the industry average, added Lourenco.

The company would extract a maximum of 500,000 tonnes of gravel annually, drawing down what is believed to be about 2.5 million tonnes of available resources. The pit would operate for seven to 10 years before closing down and being rehabilitated back to farmland.

The impact would be much smaller than opponents predict, he said.

"I've been through this process before. Perceptions change with the opening of an operation ... and neighbours find out it's not as bad as what they thought it would be."

He points to the company's pits of comparable size elsewhere, including one in Guelph-Eramosa Township that operates adjacent to a small settlement – "We do have operations that coexist with residential areas."

Still, he's not surprised there'll be a fight over the proposal, with opponents questioning why this location must be used when there's plenty of aggregate throughout the region.

While that may be, there's no certainty that just because gravel exists that anyone can get access to it, perhaps due to environmental concerns, impact on wetlands or other restrictions.

The area in question has already been designated by the township and Waterloo Region as suitable for aggregate extraction, he said, adding residents' concerns will be addressed as the application process moves along.

"Any aggregate application comes with opposition. Industry is trying to change the perception of aggregate extraction – it's not what it used to be."

Dowling, however, remains unmoved. The location is just not suitable for dump trucks making some 260 return trips each day, with gravel being crushed and hauled at all hours of day on rural roads used by horse-and-buggy Mennonites, a parochial school nearby, he said.

"There are many other sources of aggregate. This is just about the worst place you could pick."

There's also the question of negative effects on the Grand River, which offers pristine conditions and great fishing in the stretch near West Montrose, Dowling added.

To make their case, members of the Bridge Keepers will attempt to win in the forum of public opinion. They expect they're in for a long battle, one they're willing to see though.

"We have the public support, we have the will and we have the finances to continue."