

Why a Bridge ? : The Evolution of the Greenway Concept

Some comments made at the recent public open house on the preliminary design for Phase One of the Greenway left the impression that many think the pedestrian bridge over the railway cut is a “frill” or “showpiece” that was just added to the concept plan to impress people. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It is instructive to review the history of how the Greenway concept developed. At least two suggestions for official trails to be constructed along the CN railway cut surfaced in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The City of Halifax Parklands Strategy of 1995 included the railway cut routing in its “greenways” map.

Two 1999 rezonings from the Park and Institutional Zone to R-1 Residential (see the “Reports” page on the HUGA website) set alarm bells ringing in the neighbourhoods along the railway cut. The fear was that the lands along the cut would be lost as a public resource. This led to initial contacts with CN and HRM and the formation of the Halifax Urban Greenway Association in 2000.

HUGA’s initial impetus was nature conservation and the development of a hiking footpath through the backlands along the cut. This was rejected by HRM as a not intensive enough usage – it would not justify the major expenditures which might be involved for land acquisition.

HUGA was told a multi-purpose trail had to go along the route if Council support and municipal funding were to be forthcoming. HUGA’s response was that natural habitat conservation and a nature footpath were still needed, paralleling the multi-purpose trail where possible. HRM agreed with the dual trails concept.

HUGA’s intention was to develop trails only from South Street to Point Pleasant Park. We soon agreed with HRM’s argument that the Park and the two universities had to be connected to the outside world by a trail going all the way to the Armdale Rotary.

Our first proposal avoided the railway cut alignment wherever there was existing development along the cut. South of South Street, this included using Gorsebrook Avenue and Tower Road as the route to the Park after

going through the Saint Mary's lands (see accompanying map, "Rejected Southern Alignment Map"). HRM rejected this concept as too indirect and too reliant on existing streets and sidewalks. Above all, it did not open up a badly required new route to Point Pleasant Park for pedestrians and bicycles.

At this point the incomplete concept linked Dalhousie and Saint Mary's Universities – a major goal along with reaching the Park. HRM staff proposed that the multi-purpose trail cross the Marlborough Woods railway bridge and go along the west side of the cut to the bottom of Pine Hill Drive. This was rejected by HUGA: the section was highly attractive and its beauty would be destroyed, it would have come out either along a private road or virtually right up against the side of an existing home.

We were working with a consultant at this point, and asked him to price out a pedestrian bridge across the cut as the route to the Park. The cost came back as roughly the same as what it would cost to construct a second, parallel multi-purpose trail connecting to the Park along the west side of the cut – matching the one on the east side of the cut connecting with Saint Mary's.

The initially proposed, minimum span alignment of the bridge has since been shifted to minimize its impact upon existing homes. This will have increased the price, but the principle stands that the bridge is the only effective way to provide a direct route to the Park.

The bridge placement allowed the third concept principle, after parallel trails and the bridge, to be a return nature footpath loop on the west side of the cut, from Pine Hill Drive to Marlborough Woods. An informal trail which is not an official part of the Greenway connects through to Belmont on the Arm.

With the three major pillars in place, there were left a number of design issues: how to avoid having to remove mature trees on Beaufort Avenue, how to make the connection with Francklyn Street at the bottom of Pine Hill Drive, how to make an exit from the nature footpath running south from Marlborough Woods, and most recently how to run along Francklyn Street. The solutions to these issues are still being actively discussed during the design process.

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