

Halifax Green Network Public Submissions Process  
Greenbelting and Public Open Spaces Priority Plan  
c/o Halifax Regional Municipality Parks and Recreation Office  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
Attn. Holly Richardson

## Protecting the Backlands within the Halifax Green Network The Purcell's Cove Neighbourhood Committee

### Recommendations and Summary

#### ***The Purcell's Cove/William's Lake/Herring Cove Backlands:***

Within five minutes of Halifax's city center lies a unique 1300 hectare wilderness area that contains six lakes and three ponds, hills with spectacular views of the whole area and dozens of kilometers of informal hiking and biking trails. Our community believes this to be a resource that must be recognized as an essential part of the Halifax Green Network. In accordance with the principles and objectives laid out in the updated Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (October 2014), we make the following recommendations.



1. ***That the Purcell's Cove Backlands – the area bordered roughly by Williams Lake Road in the north, Purcell's Cove Road in the east, Herring Cove Road in the west and Powers Pond in the south - be included as a key feature of the new Halifax Green Network.***
2. ***That the linkages between the Backlands and other nearby protected areas in the form of interlocking watersheds and natural habitats be formally recognized and described in the Halifax Green Network plan to help maintain and protect its connectivity with the larger green network.***
3. ***That the economic, recreational, ecological and cultural assets and potential of the Backlands be recognized in the Halifax Green Network Plan.***

The background for these recommendations are given below, but the main reasons for recognizing the Backlands within the Green Network can be summarized as follows:

- **The Backlands proximity to the city makes it an ideal place for the open space and recreational goals of Halifax.**
  - People from the core of Halifax have easy access to an area that has great recreational potential (e.g., hiking, mountain biking, canoeing, swimming, skating, geo-caching).

Protecting this area would make Halifax renown as a socially and ecologically progressive, truly 21st century city, as it would foster a rare synthesis between quality of life, social/cultural values, human well-being and the environment that hardly any major urban centre can match today.

- **The Backlands contain significant cultural and historical value that is an integral part of Halifax's on-going narrative.**
  - Indian Cove and the environ around Purcell's Cove were commonly used sites by the First Nation's people before British settlement. When the British did settle on the peninsula, rock from the quarries in the Backlands was used to build many large structures and buildings that define the face of Halifax to this day. Throughout the centuries, military defence infrastructure in this area played a key role in shaping the world political landscape, including our own nation. Finally, the Backlands are an integral part of individual histories of those who come to visit its lakes and trails to this day, histories that collectively create the cultural fabric of our city.
- **The Backlands' ecological features are diverse, interesting, and some are globally rare.**
  - Notable features of its rugged terrain include the globally rare jack pine/broom crowberry barrens. Typically this consists of the signature jack pines growing among large whaleback-shaped granite outcrops, along with the low-growing broom crowberry. In late spring some of the valleys contain pockets of lady slippers. The soil in these barrens can be very shallow in spots. This makes for a unique if not fragile landscape, affording spectacular views from the higher ridges. Lakes, ponds and streams are found in the area as well as many wetlands.
- **The Backlands area is *geologically hostile* to real estate development because of its rugged terrain, which would impose huge infrastructure costs on the municipality should they be developed.**
  - There are good reason that this area has not been developed while the city grew up around it. The granite bedrock that is never far from the surface (and often exposed) means that development would require extensive blasting that would destroy the area's ecological integrity. Moreover, traffic to and from the area, if it were developed, would soon overwhelm the Armdale roundabout, forcing expensive traffic infrastructure development. Even small scale developments (such as those at Fortress Drive and Aaron's Way) would damage watersheds and fragile wetlands and put more people at risk in a fire prone area.

Of course the Backlands should not be thought of in isolation. Active transportation and ecotourism can be enhanced by improving connections: for example, the bike lanes that now extend to Purcell's Cove should eventually be continued to the beaches at Crystal Crescent Beach Provincial Park. In terms of wildlife ecology links to Long Lake Provincial Park, and an interconnected green areas including the Terrance Bay Wilderness Area and across the length and breadth of the Chebucto Peninsula should be maintained.

**Who we are and why we care**

**Our group:** Purcell’s Cove Neighbourhood Committee (PCNC), formed in 2012, evolved from community groups stretching back to the 1970s. Its main aim is to promote, protect and provide a voice for Purcell’s Cove and surrounds as a unique mixed residential and multi-use recreational area within HRM. PCNC is an affiliate of [Our HRM Alliance](#) and the [Backlands Coalition](#). It coordinates closely with other local groups including the Williams Lake Conservation Company and the Ferguson’s Cove Neighbourhood Association. Our website can be found at <http://www.pcnc.chebucto.org/>.

**Our community:** Purcell’s Cove is not a suburb of the city – it is a picturesque corner with substantial natural beauty, with a unique social and historical heritage, a special community spirit and a reputation as a welcoming retreat just a stone’s throw from the urban core. It is a community with many outstanding features, near the heart of Halifax. The roughly 350 residents of the Purcell’s Cove area include young families, artists, cultural workers, retirees, professionals, tradespeople, service workers, health workers and the self-employed. Only five minutes drive from the Rotary, it is a special blend of suburban and rural, residential areas and ‘pocket wilderness’. Its main features are the Cove itself, with its small yacht anchorage as well as unobstructed views of the harbour, Point Pleasant Park and McNab’s Island, and a substantial and unique Backlands area that encompasses undeveloped and minimally-developed private land, Crown Land, HRM land, DND land, and a segment of conservation lands donated by the Field and Napier families to the Nova Scotia Nature Trust in 2003 and 2009 respectively.

**Why we want to protect the Backlands:** We believe that one of the most remarkable and valuable aspects of the Backlands is the location of this extensive wilderness area virtually at the city’s doorstep. Not everyone in HRM is aware of the existence of the Backlands and the fact that they provide a vital and ecologically diverse link or ‘bridge’ between the urban core and outlying natural wilderness areas of the Chebucto Peninsula. The existence of such stunningly beautiful and largely untouched land with outstanding physical features and spectacular vistas, so close to the city centre, provides Halifax with the unprecedented potential to create a green network that is fully accessible to residents of the urban core as well as visitors to the city.



**Ecology, geology, flora, fauna and watersheds:** The Backlands’ geology is characterized by striking ‘whaleback’ granite ridges and huge boulders shaped by the last glacial age. The granite itself is 380 million years old, while the whalebacks were shaped by glaciation approximately 10,000 years ago. (It has taken that much time for nature to produce the meagre layer of soil in the cracks at the crest of the granite whalebacks where the Jack pine thrive.) There are at least three scenic high points in the Backlands with elevations

of roughly 80 metres -- including Piggy Mountain with its clear views of Chebucto Head and peninsular Halifax. Two geologically significant drumlins with deep soils can be found west and south of Williams Lake.

Approximately 100 acres of land around Purcell's Pond are administered by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust (see [www.nsnt.ca](http://www.nsnt.ca)). Other groups such as the Backlands Coalition ([www.backlandscoalition.ca](http://www.backlandscoalition.ca)), the Williams Lake Conservation Company (WLCC, [www.williamslakecc.org](http://www.williamslakecc.org)) and the McIntosh Run Watershed Association (MRWA, [www.mcintoshrun.ca](http://www.mcintoshrun.ca)) are concerned with, and work actively to publicize and protect, the unique features of the Backlands area as a whole. The WLCC has commissioned several excellent studies pertaining to birds, watershed features and vegetation, and, most recently, the *Ecological Assessment of the Plant Communities of the Williams Lake Backlands* (February 2014) which highlights important ecological features such as the globally rare Jack pine/broom crowberry barrens that are found throughout both the Backlands.

The two watersheds of the Backlands form a contiguous area of high outcrops and wet low valleys which are home to a remarkable amount of wildlife. Within the lands administered by the Nova Scotia Nature Trust alone, dozens of species of plants, birds, lichens and insects have been observed. There are also regular sightings of rabbit, beaver, muskrat, mink, coyote, fox and deer. The uniqueness and rarity of these pristine urban fresh water landscapes and watersheds form a unique web of such value as to warrant serious protection and stewardship. In particular, the tiny gem of Flat Lake and the surrounding area (which falls between the McIntosh Run and Williams Lake watersheds and is partly situated on HRM land) provides a superb example of a pristine Backlands location which could potentially be connected to the NSNT conservation lands. Massive granite whalebacks and primordial-looking glacial erratic boulders surround the small unspoiled lake which attracts many seasonal birds. A local artist who has painted extensively in the Backlands comments that Flat Lake gives us a rare glimpse of ancient landscape only a short distance from peninsular Halifax.

**Recreational trails:** The Backlands contain an extensive network of formal and informal trails for hiking and mountain biking and it is regularly accessed by such groups as the Halifax Field Naturalists and the Chebucto Hiking Club. Many of these rough trails were utilized by the Mi'kmaq people long before Europeans arrived. The MRWA has done a remarkable job in mapping out potential formal trails on existing HRM and Crown Lands in the southern Backlands adjoining Herring Cove. We fully support their efforts to establish an extensive trail system (starting in 2015 with construction of phase one of their planned 30 kilometre trail network) through remarkable scenery that can be accessed and enjoyed by anyone in Halifax within a short bus ride or drive from the city centre.

**Cultural and historical:** Indian Cove at the north end of Purcell's Cove (formerly Mackerel Cove) was a long-established site where First Nations people fished and celebrated festivals. The Mi'kmaq occupied the Purcell's



Probably the first railroad in Nova Scotia, later known as the Trolley Track.

(PANS)

Cove shoreline and the whole of the present Backlands to support their lifestyle prior to and for years after the British settled in peninsular Halifax 1749. The little inlet at the north end of the cove was called Indian Cove. From there began a trail called Indian Path, which was the head of a network of trails used to access the fishing lakes and hunting grounds in the Backlands. Established in 1759, the historic granite and slate quarries of the Backlands were used to build the forts, batteries and many historic Halifax buildings. The quarries extended from Indian Cove to the plateau 70 metres above. In 1834 the quarries started using a steam railroad (possibly the first industrial railway in Nova Scotia) to access the quarries and the old tramway bed is well preserved. Although mostly overgrown, some segments show sturdy stonework beds which are now used as scenic walking trails. Old maps in the Nova Scotia archives show an 18th century road connecting the military batteries above Ferguson's Cove with Spryfield through the heart of the Backlands. Parts of this road are still used by hikers.



The Backlands is also the subject of local painters and photographers whose works of art remind us that the extraordinary rugged beauty of the area is worth appreciating for its own sake. For example, the work of local landscape painter Geoffrey Grantham, chosen in 2012 as a CBC 'Sharing the View' artist, provides a compelling first-hand visual record of the Backlands' many moods and seasons.

**The Green Network:** Given our deep-rooted interest in preserving the quality of life in HRM, PCNC welcomes the chance to put the Backlands on the map as an area within the Green Network Plan. We see this as an opportunity to share with others the special features and assets of the Backlands in its entirety and want to highlight the need to provide effective regional stewardship for these areas. As a member of Our HRM Alliance, we fully endorse the Green Network as a way to concentrate growth in the urban core, to preserve green areas that are vital in addressing climate change, and to protect watersheds and ecologically sensitive areas, and provide healthy outdoor recreational opportunities. The Green Network is very important for the future preservation and effective collective use of the space surrounding Halifax. The inclusion of the Backlands in this plan would recognize that a regional municipality is much more than simply an area in which economic development takes place. It is also a location to foster a rare synthesis between quality of life, social/cultural values, human well-being and the environment.

Overall, we believe that there is significant prestige to be gained for Halifax (both nationally and internationally) if the true potential of the urban greenbelt is realized. Portions of the Backlands are currently Crown or HRM land, but in the area immediately south of Williams Lake and behind Purcell's Cove itself there remain private lands zoned as 'urban reserve'. This designation does offer some protection, at least for the time being. But in the long run the area as a whole needs the formal recognition protection that can only come from its incorporation into the Green Network and we hope that private landowners and developers can also see the many advantages in allowing their lands to be considered as part of this initiative. The Backlands, incorporating the McIntosh Run and Williams Lake watersheds and ecological systems, is a great natural landscape that remains so close to the downtown



PCNC Submission: The Halifax Green Network Plan, July 10, 2015

core which can be properly designated an “urban wilderness.” To lose the opportunity to protect this area from development would seriously undermine Halifax’s potential as a socially and ecologically progressive community.

We would be happy to provide any further information as required. We look forward to receiving acknowledgement from the coordinator of the Green Network Plan regarding our input and we hope that our information will contribute substantially to the planning process.

Yours sincerely,

For the Purcell’s Cove Neighbourhood Committee

Nathan Brett ([nbrett@dal.ca](mailto:nbrett@dal.ca))

Anne Gillies ([gilliesae@yahoo.ca](mailto:gilliesae@yahoo.ca))

Geoffrey Grantham ([effey01@yahoo.ca](mailto:effey01@yahoo.ca))

Anne Gillies ([gilliesae@yahoo.ca](mailto:gilliesae@yahoo.ca))

Reuben Penner ([reuben.penner@gmail.com](mailto:reuben.penner@gmail.com))

J. Vincent Purcell ([dvpurcell@gmail.com](mailto:dvpurcell@gmail.com))

Marcos Zentilli ([zentilli@eastlink.ca](mailto:zentilli@eastlink.ca))

Cc: [clerks@halifax.ca](mailto:clerks@halifax.ca) for distribution to the Mayor and City Councillors

*Painting (p. 5) courtesy of Geoffrey Grantham. Photographs (p. 3, 6) N. Brett; (p. 4) , NS Archives.*

