

Cannon backs development freeze in Park; Minister pitched idea of moratorium on private building in Gatineau Park: Chelsea mayor

Lawrence Cannon, the federal cabinet minister responsible for Gatineau Park, suggested a municipal government moratorium on private development in the park at a meeting with Chelsea Mayor Jean Perras and park supporters.

The suggestion follows organized public opposition to a planned 18-home development at the former Carman Trails Outdoor Centre off Highway 105 at Farm Point. It was used as a hostel until 18 months ago and is still a snowshoe and hiking trail.

Owner Robert Grace said 12 houses will be built on the site and the rest of the property will be used for a theatre and farm.

Mr. Cannon did not return calls for further comment. His spokeswoman, Catherine Loubier, said protecting the park is a priority for Mr. Cannon, but he is waiting for the NCC to provide new park boundaries this fall.

"Mr. Cannon will look at the different scenarios put forward by the NCC because his position is to conserve the park everywhere possible," Ms. Loubier said. "But he has an arm's length relationship with the NCC and can't be involved in day-to-day administration.

"That is why he is going to wait for the plan to come out and take the appropriate action if any."

Park activists keen to block new development in the park doubt that any level of government will stop the Carman Road housing project.

Chelsea council approved the development last fall without informing the National Capital Commission.

NCC officials said the commission did not have the opportunity to acquire the property and the housing project is not the "preferred option for the land."

Nicole Desroches, director of the Conseil régionale de l'environnement et du développement durable de l'Outaouais, said Mr. Cannon on March 10 suggested that the regional government, the MRC des Collines de l'Outaouais, should place a moratorium on development in the park.

The regional municipality includes Cantley, Chelsea, L'Ange-Gardien, La Pêche, Notre-Dame-de-la-Salette, Pontiac and Val-des-Monts.

"Mr. Cannon said we should ask the MRC to impose a moratorium because it is revising its master plan," Ms. Desroches said. "The MRC has some power to do this, but if that happens the owners would ask for compensation.

"No government is going to do that kind of stuff because nobody wants to impose anything. The NCC has the power to do it, but it would cost money."

Muriel How, a member of the Gatineau Park Protection Coalition and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, said yesterday that Mr. Cannon suggested at a March 10 meeting that municipalities partly within the park could stop development to preserve the land.

"Lawrence Cannon said there should be a moratorium on development and told us he was going to see the mayor (of Chelsea) about it the next day," Ms. How said. "But I think the chances of a moratorium are very slim. The mayor has said that if someone wants to construct something on private land and follows all the regulations, he can't stop them, even if it is in the park."

Building lots on Carman Road site were advertised last week in the weekly Low Down to Hull and Back News.

Ms. How said it is sad that there is a lack of political will to stop development in the park.

"All federal political parties have been ignoring the fact that Gatineau Park needs protection," she said. "Ten years ago, it wasn't important, but now Chelsea has gone absolutely crazy about development.

"Property owners are developing everywhere and don't care whether what they are building is in the park."

Mr. Perras confirmed that Mr. Cannon spoke to him about a moratorium on development within the park or having the federal government buy land that could be developed.

But the mayor said the idea of stopping housing in the park is impractical because property owners could sue any level of government that tried to limit property rights.

"I understand where the park activists are coming from, but I have another priority, which is to respond to the property owners of Chelsea," Mr. Perras said.

Mr. Perras said he doesn't believe the federal government can prevent construction in the park, but the development problem could be resolved if landowners had to offer their properties first to the the NCC.