

## Cambridge's 'trail guy' gets national award

BY KEVIN SWAYZE, RECORD STAFF

CAMBRIDGE — Nineteen years ago, Bob McMullen complained about city trucks tearing up the city hiking trail near his Preston home.

Today, he has no plans to end his push to protect and expand essential public infrastructure such as the Linear Trail along the Grand River — not when so many people could do with a good day out in the sunshine.

His passion for walkable neighbourhoods and “active transportation” has grown into what some might call an obsession. He often picks his travels across the U.S. based on the trails he can walk and bicycle along, or the pedestrian-friendly cities around the world where he steals ideas.

As the 69-year-old recently learned, he's a borderline diabetic after years of succumbing to his sweet tooth, so get ready to hear more from him about the value of a daily walk or ride to keep a person healthy.

The Toronto native has been one of the most vocal members of Cambridge council's trails advisory committee — with six years as chair. He says there's still plenty of work ahead to change the mindset of politicians willing to accept poorly planned, car-centric development that wounds established, people-friendly neighbourhoods such as his. Then there's encouraging politicians to build more trails and bike lanes to meet growing demand for off-road transportation.

“Why do we have to fight and scream? There's no political will.”

Known to many simply as “the trail guy,” McMullen gets national recognition for his work Wednesday. The Canadian Parks and Recreation Association has picked him for its 2010 Award of Merit.

After he complained in 1991 about the city trucks on Linear Trail, he was invited to join the city's trails committee by Wayne Taylor, then city community services commissioner.

Taylor was always impressed with McMullen's willingness to propose solutions — and his readiness to pitch in to make ideas work.

“He wouldn't just talk about something,” Taylor said. “He would do it.”

McMullen joined the trails committee in 1993. He retired from 27 years of teaching at Preston High School in 1997.

Early on, McMullen proved his skills as a scrounger, begging for truckloads of stone dust to fix washouts in the Riverside Park trails when the tiny city trails budget ran out. While teaching, he arranged for Preston High students to pick up trash along Sulphur Creek beside Dover Flour Mills, or arranged for summer job grants to help troubled youth swing hammers while rebuilding boardwalks.

Nor was he ever shy about tapping local businesses to contribute to the cause — businesses such as Arriscraft, to help improve the trail crossing along the Speed River under Highway 401, or Toyota to send 250 workers out to clean up Soper Park and Mill Creek.

“I see myself as an advocate and a bridge,” McMullen said.

He has twice run for Waterloo Region council, but wasn't elected. He's mulling running again in October.

City staff and politicians praise him, but his just-get-it-done style is anti-bureaucratic.

There's a photo in McMullen's garage, showing him pushing a lawn mower on the Grand Trunk Trail along George Street some 15 years ago. For three summers, he kept busy beating back the grass and brush along the trail because the city wouldn't.

“It was because it had to be done. I know that doesn't always jibe with city policy,” he said.

“You roll with it and you do what you have to do.”

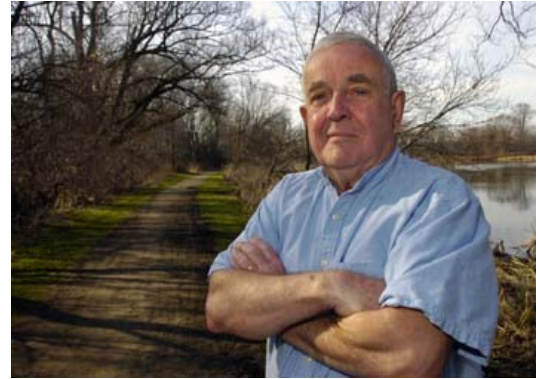
Don't mistake McMullen with someone who embraces every urban redevelopment project. Look at the Preston Meadows development on the former Kanmet foundry site on Margaret Avenue in old Preston. It's just ham-fisted residential intensification, not a showcase for smart reurbanization, he said.

Reids Heritage Homes has city approval to build 193 homes in apartments and townhouses on the 4.2-hectare (10.5-acre) site. City council sees it as a showpiece example of urban redevelopment of a dirty old factory site.

McMullen sees misery for owners of single family homes all around, in the century-old Preston neighbourhood.

Everybody is going to drive a car, he said. It's too far from Grand River Transit bus stops — and now there's no rapid transit planned within kilometres.

“You're just aiding and abetting traffic congestion,” McMullen said.



Record staff  
Retired teacher Bob McMullen has spoken out to protect trails, such as the Linear Trail near his home in the Preston area of Cambridge.

He's no fan of plans to spend \$15 million on a roundabout at King and Fountain streets without looking at the root cause: no other roads were built to handle traffic from the growing industrial basin around the Toyota car factory.

Nor is he pleased with city-region plans for a safe pedestrian-cycling link across Highway 401 at Franklin Boulevard. The talk is all about building a new bridge beside the old, but that will take years to bring to reality.

McMullen's practical side shines through again: put up temporary concrete barriers along the narrow sidewalk that exists today along Franklin Bridge. Then use more barriers to force pedestrians to make safer choices while crossing the Highway 401 off-ramp.

It may not be perfect, but it is an inexpensive interim fix he's seen work well in the U.S.

McMullen offers no magic elixir to encourage people to volunteer like he's done over the years. They have to see they'll get some personal benefit from all the work, he said. And more than a little fun along the way

"People will realize they have something to contribute," he said.

"I think it's a question of inviting people to come forward to do it for their community."

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