

## **Addressing myths about the Hanlon Creek business park site, Guelph**

*Op-Ed in Guelph Mercury, Mar 28, 2012*

I'm writing in response to Matt Soltys' Feb. 17 column Hanlon Creek sacrificed in the name of progress.

Environmental activism is an important force in Canada and across the globe. Environmental advocacy has transformed the policy discourse.

But that important role does not give the environmental movement a free ticket to advocate for issues that have no substance. Rational debate is required. Facts and science are important, not just emotion.

Environmental advocates are not saints with an inside track to the truth. They make errors in judgment like all of us.

The campaign against the Hanlon Creek business park was an error in judgment by environmental advocates. The issue had no substance, except as a general opposition to all development of any sort.

Population growth leads to development.

I was chair of the city's environmental advisory committee. Many exaggerated and inaccurate words have been used to describe the Hanlon Creek business park. "Pristine wetlands," "wilderness," and "old growth forest" are among the inappropriate phrases applied to the site.

The facts about the site are quite different. The environmental advisory committee has spent many hours over several years reviewing the city's environmental impact reports and walking the site. The public discussion about this site should be grounded in facts, not myths.

The lands of the Hanlon Creek business park are similar to many undeveloped lands across the city and surrounding Wellington County: farmland, cornfields, streams with many impacts, wetlands affected by artificial drainage and invasive species, and young regenerating forests.

It's far from unique, pristine or wilderness. Yet the key natural features do deserve protection and our committee supported the city's environmental reports on the site, subject to 17 different environmental conditions that we expect the city to meet.

Old growth forests, using any scientific definition of this term, do not exist on this site. In fact most of the forests are relatively young. Some older heritage trees found along Forestell Road are protected under the current plan. The term old growth forest means that the forest ecosystem has specific physical and biological features, such as a lack of disturbance by humans, characteristic old growth plant and animal species, large, old living and dead standing trees, and trees in all age classes.

The Western chorus frog is found at the site and at other sites in the city and surrounding regions. This species was recently declared not-at-risk in Ontario, while nationally one population of the species is listed as threatened due to declines in other provinces. The endangered Jefferson salamander may be found at the site, or not.

Certainty of this species' occurrence is tough to establish due to its reclusive habits and difficulties separating it from "hybrids" that combine genetic characteristics of the Jefferson and the more common Blue-spotted salamander. Ontario's new Endangered Species Act imposes strong protections on the Jefferson salamander.

The environmental advisory committee is an arm's-length, volunteer advisory committee of citizens with technical expertise in environmental science. Our committee's work was part of the lengthy, democratic public consultation process that this project underwent.

The committee did not get everything we sought; compromise is the nature of the democratic process.

The Hanlon Creek business park contains provincially significant wetlands, streams, and other ecological features that deserve protection. But there are other lands within the business park that can be developed in a sustainable manner.

Achieving environmental, social and economic objectives concurrently is what sustainability is all about. Let's have a civil discussion about the facts and forget the myth about fictitious "old growth wilderness."

*Paul Smith is a former chair of the City of Guelph Environmental Advisory Committee.*

<http://www.quephmercury.com/opinion-story/2779572-addressing-myths-about-the-hanlon-creek-business-park-site/>