

# COMMENTARY: Spare HRM's Sandy Lake 'jewel' in suburban HRM from bulldozers

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Last Updated March 7, 2018 - 7:19am



Sandy Lake, pictured, is critical to the integrity of the Sackville River system and is worth protecting. (CONTRIBUTED)

Halifax is unique as a major metropolitan area that is penetrated and surrounded by natural spaces offering a wide range of landscapes and outdoor experiences.

The city's developing Green Network Plan is essential to preserve these natural areas across HRM and provide landscape connectivity to ensure that local populations of plants and animals do not become isolated.

Recent purchases of lands by HRM in the areas of Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes and the Purcell's Cove Backlands are key steps in the realization of the Green Network. There are others that still need protection, such as the Sandy Lake area that stretches between the Sackville River and Hammonds Plains Road of Bedford.

Nearly 50 years ago, the Sandy Lake area was selected as one of seven unique "jewels in the crown" of Halifax-Dartmouth that should be protected for their ecological richness and for community education and recreation. Each area was seen as unique from each other and outstanding

in its own right. The Canada Land Inventory Recreation Capability Survey gave Sandy Lake the highest rating of any inland site around the metropolitan area.

Over the years, all six of the other areas (including McNabs Island and the Shubenacadie Canal) have been preserved, but Sandy Lake Regional Park ran into difficulties of various kinds. At amalgamation, the Town of Bedford's work to acquire land and create the regional park there fell by the wayside.

A large area on the eastern side of Sandy Lake — the Jack Lake lands — appears secure. Lands to the west and north of Sandy Lake that are critical for maintaining the integrity of Sandy Lake and the watercourse through Marsh Lake to the Sackville River are at risk.

A clearcut of old forest in 2013 raised alarms. Now those lands lying close to Sandy Lake could be developed with residences for as many as 12,000 people. Sandy Lake is one of many jewels across HRM that continues to wait for legal protection from development, and it may not be able to wait forever.

There are many reasons why the Sandy Lake lands are worth protecting in the form of a Sandy Lake Regional Park. The Sandy Lake watershed is the largest sub-watershed of the Sackville River and hosts populations of seagoing American eel, Atlantic salmon, Gaspereau and speckled trout.

The integrity of this system is critical to the Sackville Rivers Association's efforts to revive salmon in the Sackville River system. This park would protect Bedford from increased flooding by protecting the Sackville River flood plain. The wetlands bordering Sandy Lake and Marsh Lake and along much of Peverill Brook leading to the Sackville River host a complex, healthy ecosystem that includes large populations of amphibians and turtles.

Sandy and Marsh lakes are bordered by rich drumlins that support magnificent mixed, multi-aged Acadian forest with significant old-growth stands. The whole sweep of forest provides a wildlife corridor at the neck of the Chebucto peninsula, north to the Sackville River and the mainland — an important link to be preserved by the Green Network Plan.

Currently, a wide variety of outdoor activities are conducted on these lands, including mountain biking, birdwatching, swimming, paddling, fishing, dog-walking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, to name a few; the power lines are popular corridors for ATVs. There are wonderful opportunities for "forest bathing" amid old-growth and along hemlock-lined sections of Peverill's Brook. There is so much more potential — if we can save it now. Few even know it exists — a rich and unique jewel of nature only 20 minutes from downtown.

Recent limnological observations suggest that Sandy Lake is in a precarious state and almost certainly would not survive the cited development. With such precious populations of fish, amphibians, turtles and other wildlife including river otters, why shouldn't we strive to "walk the story backwards," towards a cleaner, oligotrophic state? This is even more urgent in the era of climate warming.

As a growing city, it is clear Halifax needs housing development. We need to protect our beautiful natural systems while making it easier to develop in existing built-up areas. Allowing housing

growth in what was so long known as an important natural asset may yield short-term returns for the city, but turning such a natural wonder into housing would be a colossal loss to the community, to the city, to Bedford, Hammonds Plains, Sackville, to the green network, and to the unique ecosystem it nourishes in the Sackville River watershed.

Citizens and the Town of Bedford have worked since before 1970 to keep it safe and to acquire 1,000 acres — the halfway point of a magnificent park plan. Time is running out because development has been on a parallel path and is close to overtaking the park goals. Delays to the Green Network Plan are putting places like Sandy Lake at risk. We need to see concerted action from HRM to enact the Green Network Plan and ensure that jewels like Sandy Lake will be preserved for generations to come. There will likely never be another chance to preserve stunning areas like Sandy Lake for the long-term benefit of the entire city and province.

**Karen Robinson is park committee chair of the Sandy Lake Conservation Association. She also writes on behalf of the Sackville Rivers Association.**