

To Mayor Matt Brown and members of London City Council,

My name is Samantha Pacifico and my family and I have lived on Gloucester Road in London for almost 30 years. I was in attendance at the public city hall meeting April 16th regarding the Conservation Master Plan for the Medway Valley Heritage Forest. This valley is one that has always been regarded as a very special, even sacred place among those who have visited it. An undisturbed Carolinian forest like this one is part of what makes London a special place and separates it from other cities like it. Google reviews from visitors include statements like, “you sink into the valley and the city disappears” (Ryan Talbot), “nice trails and lots of terrain. Makes you forget you’re in the city.” (Jeff Lamb), and “I love Medway. There aren’t a lot of places a person can go in London to be alone and surrounded by nature.” (Megan Sheldon). When I visited this valley as a child, it was amazing to see this mostly untouched forest in the middle of our city, undisturbed by noise, traffic, and human construction. My siblings and I quickly realized how fragile the ecosystem in the valley is, and that we were visitors in the home of all of its plants and animals.

A plan has been made for the Medway Valley Heritage Forest to undergo construction. This plan proposes a large paved accessible path as well as bridges built over the river in order to connect it with asphalt paths in the Sunningdale and Western University areas. The path as it stands is minimally intrusive to this environmentally sensitive area, and a lack of connection to these other large paths helps to reduce traffic. Even bicycles and off-leash dogs are a big threat to the delicate ecosystem in the area and are not allowed- and this new path will bring motorized vehicles into the valley for regular maintenance or scooter accessibility. During the first few hours of the April 16th meeting, Andrew Macpherson and other employees stressed that the level 2 paths in the valley would “not necessarily” be asphalt, and that a compacted path could “take many forms”— however they eventually admitted that these paths would in fact need to be paved asphalt because their location in the valley is prone to flooding (now making it a level 3 path). In many places, the walls of the valley are extremely steep and at certain times of the year are impossible to traverse. At times when I have experienced this, I have never thought, “This should really be paved so that I can keep walking”. I have no problem turning around and going home, because I accept that situations like those are part of keeping the valley as undisturbed as possible. The valley’s natural landscape is at extreme odds with one that would be compatible with an asphalt path. To reshape the glacier-made valley with appropriate grading for wheelchair accessibility will not only be very difficult, but will require serious work with heavy machinery. One very concerning aspect of the plan has to do with the two proposed bridges to be built over Medway Creek. Councillor Phil Squire and Sandy Levin made an effort to emphasize how much larger, more industrial and more intrusive these bridges are than the Metamora Bridge, which the CMP authors compare these to. Representatives showed photographs of the bridges in the North end of the valley while under construction, attempting to show that because there was no equipment in the water, the work was totally safe for the valley. The photo showed a cement truck pouring one of the very large concrete foundations for the bridge. Cement trucks weigh up to 30,000 pounds, and can carry up to 40,000 pounds of material. Roads will need to be constructed just to allow these trucks into the steep and narrow valley, causing significant damage that will be very difficult to control. To think that these trucks can sneak into the valley and quietly complete their work is to be in total denial. If a cement truck was running in your driveway for weeks, the noise would likely drive you out. I can not even begin to imagine how this will affect the plants and animals in the area.

Another major issue is the fact that the surrounding community was left in the dark about the project. First Nations representatives were not consulted. Notices were to be delivered to affected households in Medway Heights, and they were not. All of the residents were adamant about this fact. Residents of Medway Heights got a final notice at the very end of this 5-year project, and nothing more. When asked point blank if proper notices had been delivered, Andrew Macpherson said yes. One household that will be directly affected was not notified at all, and city employees had no intention of notifying the residents. Not only this, but when the residents moved into the house 3 years ago, they asked Andrew Macpherson if any project was planned for the access point and he responded no, despite the fact that this CMP had already been in the works for 2 years at that point. The CMP directs traffic up through a bridle path to exit onto Green Acres Drive, where the public is then directed to walk through the Medway Heights neighbourhood down Gloucester Rd, where they will then descend back into the valley on a separate path. This is to avoid sending traffic through the highest concentration of the endangered false rue-anemone in the valley. It is very unrealistic to think that visitors will hike

an extra half kilometre out of their way to back-track down into the valley when there is a much faster route: directly through the false rue-anemone. We can put dozens of signs up, and the reality is that people will think they are the only ones quickly cutting through, thinking they can not possibly be doing any damage. This site is one of only a handful in Canada where this species still grows, and this site has the highest number of plants. More than one City employee admitted that signs are not read thoroughly, and are even torn down by trail users. This plan will change the dynamic and traffic level of the Medway Heights neighbourhood, and the Medway Valley Heritage Forest.

The vast majority of speakers at the April 16th meeting were residents of the neighbourhoods that border the South end of the valley, and were in opposition to the CMP. There were several individuals who spoke in support of the plan from the Sunningdale neighbourhood. Residents in the Sunningdale neighbourhood wanted a paved path in Medway Valley North to better connect their area. The path was constructed, and they love and enjoy it. I genuinely think that's a great thing. The community surrounding the South end of the valley, however, is united in not wanting to construct this path or introduce connectivity. Let me be clear: in no way am I saying that the valley belongs to the community around it. However, I think it is fundamentally wrong to leave these communities out of the conversation, to leave First Nations people out of the conversation, and to mislead Londoners regarding the reality of the plan. Extending the pathways from the North end of Medway Valley into the South end is not anyone's right, no matter how badly they may want it. The South end of Medway Valley is not the same as the North end. There is a higher concentration of plants and animals— almost twice the number of bird species alone. It is not the same environment and it can not be treated the same. We can not open up this area to traffic from tens of thousands of people annually and think it will remain wild. Many residents of the communities surrounding the South end of the valley have lived there and spent time in it for upwards of 20 years— longer than the Sunningdale neighbourhood has existed. They have fought hard to keep it in its natural state despite development. As a young London native who is now deciding where I want to settle and raise my family, I was astounded at the amount of deceit— and the indifference to it— at the April 16 meeting. A student from the Western Wildlife Conservation Society was in attendance and sat behind me, and I felt so ashamed as he expressed his (and over 75 other members') disgust that the City of London could go against its own official plan, which states that an ESA should be kept in its natural state. Formal paved paths and bridges alter an area from its natural state.

We are not talking about a park. We are talking about a rare forest filled with wildlife. We are also not only talking about endangered species such as the false rue-anemone, which was discussed at length at the meeting— we are talking about the fate of all plants and animals that live there. There are animals that live their lives in the valley with minimal human contact, almost as they would far outside of a city. This is an extremely special situation. My understanding is that the purpose of this path is to manufacture an easier way to see what is in the valley- but the irony is that much of the wildlife you are trying to witness will be driven out. The number of people recorded using other paved paths in the city is large, and linking it all will likely increase traffic exponentially. Even if you disregard the fact that there will be very loud, intrusive, prolonged construction in order to realize this plan, imagine for a moment the increase in traffic alone. If a bird sees dozens of people pass by an area every day, it will not build its nest and lay its eggs there. If an area becomes busy in the spring months when the snow has melted, and the sounds of human conversation are in the air and bicycles are going by, deer will not return there to bear their young. They just won't. I lived in Toronto for two years, near the Cedarvale ravine. It is a very long, wide, wheelchair-accessible compacted path that connects neighbourhoods. People including myself used it as part of their daily commute, and there was heavy traffic of all kinds on weekends. There are tall grasses and some plants there, but there is no wildlife. The bridges are filled with graffiti, there is often drug paraphernalia there, and it is dangerous at night (and this is in an affluent neighbourhood, not a rough area of the city). At this time it may seem extreme to compare London to a city of Toronto's size, but Toronto was not always so large, and London is rapidly growing— especially in the North end around Sunningdale. Once permanent changes are made to these areas, it is not a stretch to say that my grandchildren — or even my children— will be experiencing a completely different kind of Medway Valley than I did.

I am very disappointed that this conversation has turned into an “environment vs. accessibility” argument, because both issues are so important and worthy of attention. I think it's amazing that London has so many accessible paths— like parts of Medway Valley that are already

accessible— but we can not make every path accessible. Museums, schools, restaurants, movie theatres, parks— I wholeheartedly believe, of course, that all places like these in the city should be able to be enjoyed by everyone together. But that is because the city is made for us and belongs to us. The Medway Valley Heritage Forest is not ours, it was not made for us, and it is not for us to live in. It is not our home. The creatures that live there do not go somewhere else to sleep, eat, or learn to walk. It is all they have. If we change it and make it our own, they will leave out of necessity so that they and their offspring can thrive the way they are meant to. We must allow them to do this. We can not force them out. The combination of serious and prolonged construction, increased foot traffic, new bicycle and motorized traffic, and a huge increase in human noise will change this valley forever. If realized, the authors of this proposal should be prepared to accept responsibility for the consequences these changes would bring. The Medway Valley Heritage Forest, a provincially and federally recognized site, could be reduced to a park.

Please— I urge you to recognize the seriousness and importance of this decision and consider the well-being of the forest and its inhabitants above all else. Please vote to leave this part of Medway Valley in its natural state with no additional bridges or paths higher than level 1. Because once you make this decision, you can not take it back.

Once you do this, you can not take it back.

Thank you, sincerely, for your time and attention.

Samantha Pacifico

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