

At Colquitz River, a trail of controversy

Katherine Dedyne / Times Colonist

DECEMBER 4, 2016 06:00 AM



Saanich homeowners stand along Colquitz Creek near Wilkinson Road and Lindsay Street. The district has removed 19 trees to widen the trail in the fish habitat while holding residents to a higher standard under development rules, the residents say.
Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Saanich has a double standard when it comes to protecting environmentally sensitive areas, says a group of homeowners, objecting to the damage they see taking place with the district's work on the extension of the Colquitz River trail along Lindsay Street.

The district allows itself far more leeway in developing the streamside project than would ever be allowed to homeowners covered by the controversial Environmental Development Permit Area bylaw, according to about a dozen homeowners who turned out on the trail for a closer look last week.

The extension has led to the downing of 19 trees, removal of foliage around the path and risk to the salmon-bearing capacity of the river, they contend.

"Saanich has a 'do as I say, not do as I do' model," said Karen Harper, who contends that no homeowner living alongside a river would be able to build a pathway so close to the water. "These are practically at the high-water mark," she pointed out.

Most of the trail is more than five metres from the water line, responded a Saanich spokeswoman, with the exception of challenging topography such as slopes.

Nor does the extension trail fall within the EDPA.

"It would not be accurate to compare the work on this trail with the residential parameters in the EDPA," she added. True, private property owners who want to construct a trail that parallels a stream must ensure at least five metres distance from the high-water mark as outlined in the Saanich Streamside Development Permit Area bylaw. "However, it's also important to note that municipal infrastructure projects have always been exempt from this bylaw."

That said, the district requires that "environmental best practices to be followed."

"Wherever possible, we worked to minimize tree removals," the Saanich spokeswoman said. "Most of these trees were smaller, had structural defects, were decaying or were in poor condition."

So much greenery has been removed that it's "bizarre," said Griff Tripp. The trail is now so wide, "it's accessible to limousines — comfortably."

"This blows me away, I can't believe it," added Paul Daam after walking along the new trailbed in the drizzle.

"The trail should meander," he said, standing on a roughly four-metre wide pathway covered in orange mesh. "You don't want to walk your dog down here anymore. It's not cosy."

But Saanich responds that the wide-open feel is because invasive species have been removed to make room for native plants soon to be planted.

"The finished trail will be three metres wide, which is consistent with other sections of the Colquitz River trail located nearby," the statement said.

"The vision for a multi-use Colquitz River trail has existed for more than three decades and will eventually extend as far as Elk and Beaver Lake Regional Park."

Saanich retained an environmental consultant to monitor the trail construction until completion, the spokeswoman added.

As far as salmon in the stream, "it looks like they're destroying the capability for spawning," said Donna Fyfe, who lives nearby and noted her father used to fish there.

Saanich said it follows regulations outlined by the Water Sustainability Act administered by the province. An environmental plan is being followed, the district said.

Still, the homeowner group's consensus is that Saanich's approach is "overboard." Pointing at a huge Douglas fir perched beside an excavated area, Martha Carlsen said: "They've ruined the roots," adding that she doesn't see how the tree can survive.

Jacob Brothers Construction of Surrey won the \$696,000 contract from Saanich to construct the Colquitz River trail as part of a \$6.5-million infrastructure project on Wilkinson Road, including replacement of the 1935 Lindsay Street bridge. Provincial gas-tax funding will pay for \$4.9 million of

the cost.

kdedyna@timescolonist.com

© Copyright Times Colonist