

Biosphere plan heads to Ottawa

Dana MacPhail

JOHNSTOWN- After years of countless volunteer hours, a group working to secure UNESCO designation for the Bras d'Or Lake watershed is moving ahead with high hopes.

The Bras d'Or Lake Biosphere Reserve Association (BLBRA) is asking for international designation for the area under the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The designation depends on existing protected spaces like provincial parks and nature reserves, but does not create additional protected spaces.

BLBRA recently received confirmation, just prior to its fourth annual general meeting, that signed letters of support are on the way from the respective ministers of Environment and Labour, Natural Resources and Economic Development. That confirmation is all the group would be required to provide but it has also sought backing from other groups.

BLBRA has garnered support from the municipalities of Richmond County, Victoria County and the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, in addition to endorsements from the Unama'ki Institute of Natural Resources, Parks Canada, NewPage, the Strait-Highlands Regional Development Agency, Destination Cape Breton and Cape Breton University.

The Municipality of the County of Inverness has denied its support. But the group is prepared to continue the process without the municipality's support.

Richmond County Council also delayed its decision on the project but BLBRA chair Teresa MacNeil says that process did prove beneficial. The council has since strongly endorsed the project.

"It wasn't fun at the time but in retrospect they took time and they asked questions and indeed in a couple of cases we provided some information that we had not originally even thought to provide. So the whole thing was richer in the end," she said.

The association will be sending the document, which numbers more than 300 pages, to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO in Ottawa for the national approval required before it can be sent to the international panel in Paris that will judge the nomination. MacNeil is hopeful the Paris panel will respond by the fall.

The group also sent the document to Ottawa last year and have since benefited from the feedback.

"We got an assessment and there were some excellent suggestions for further information that we should include and we've done that. So all in all, the year was busy and we didn't want to have this extra year, but it has served us well," she concluded.

MacNeil says the group values its relationships with the aforementioned municipalities and organizations as well as the Collaborative Environmental Planning Initiative (CEPI), a cross-section of interested parties (government, academia, industry, etc.) working to manage the Bras d'Or Lake and its watershed in a sustainable manner.

AGM guest speaker Dan Christmas, adviser to the Membertou Band Council, spoke about CEPI during his remarks.

The volunteer BLBRA group formed in early 2003 to begin the project and have been working, for the most part, without funding, ever since. Money raised from fundraising projects was spent on promotional materials, including the Web site and a series of brochures.

A UNESCO Biosphere Reserve is an ecological area with conservation, sustainable development and logistic support for scientific research and education as guiding principles. Despite the international recognition, the land remains under sovereign control of the provincial and federal government.

A copy of the nomination document, maps and contact information is available on the Web site of the volunteer group: www.blbra.ca.

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