

Mom takes on activist role to save Ojibway

BY MONICA WOLFSON, THE WINDSOR STAR FEBRUARY 6, 2009



Nancy is concerned over the possible construction of a major commercial development on property adjacent to Windsor Raceway and directly opposite the Ojibway Prairie Complex, "Canada's most endangered ecosystem." The Ojibway Prairie has more rare species than any other provincial park in Ontario. Pancheshan and other area environmentalist believe increased traffic, especially along Matchette Road, will harm the sensitive tallgrass prairie environment.

Photograph by: Nick Brancaccio, The Windsor Star

LASALLE -- Stay-at-home mom Nancy Pancheshan used to spend her days getting the kids to school, going for nature walks in Ojibway Park and volunteering at festivals.

But since she started fighting to protect the Ojibway Nature Preserve, which borders a proposed big box development in Windsor, the LaSalle mother of two has become an environmental activist.

She now spends eight hours a day reading legal documents like the Ontario Planning and Development Act, takes pictures of roadkill, tries to convince expert witnesses to testify and plans a fundraiser to pay for the legal expenses.

"I'll have to subpoena an ecologist to speak in the case," she said. "I don't even know how to subpoena."

Pancheshan, who has no legal background, is one of at least five appellants who have appealed a zoning decision by the City of Windsor to the Ontario Municipal Board. The city rezoned property at the corner of Sprucewood Avenue and Matchette Road to commercial from residential in the fall of 2007. The case involves the proposed development of 47 acres into a big box shopping plaza by Coco Development Group.

The city's lawyer, Wira Vendrasco, said Coco can't move ahead with its plans until an OMB decision is

made.

When she got out of her black Jeep Friday, Pancheshan clutched a stack of documents including three newspaper clippings detailing how developers have sued residents for appealing planning decisions to the OMB.

“(The lawyer for Coco Development Group) asked me why I was taking the risk,” she said. “I could get sued by them (if we lose).”

The project has gobbled up much of the last year as Pancheshan read thousands of documents to prepare for an eight-week OMB hearing that starts July 6. The town of LaSalle and several Windsor and LaSalle residents are also parties in the hearing.

Pancheshan smooths out brightly coloured pages of a 16-page Powerpoint presentation she's spent months preparing. It's the fruit of her labours spent documenting the five endangered and five threatened species that reside in the park, including the eastern fox snake, the butler's garter snake, blanding's turtle and the slender bush clover.

She has interviewed numerous botanists, biologists and geologists to find expert witnesses that she can call to testify that the big box development, which might attract up to 130,000 vehicles a week on Matchette Road, will harm the nature preserve across the street.

“I'm trying to find a hydro-geologist,” she said. “They aren't exactly in the phonebook. I've talked to five already and no one wants to get involved in an OMB case.”

Pancheshan fears the traffic and widening of Matchette Road will harm animals that cross from the nature preserve to the park on the other side of the street. She also predicts that garbage will get blown into the preserve from the shopping centre.

Pancheshan said she feels pulled in several directions as she juggles talking to lawyers, recruiting witnesses, organizing a fundraising gala and taking care of her family. The hearing might cost her more than \$10,000 to bring witnesses to Windsor.

Pancheshan, who calls Ojibway one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada, said she couldn't abandon the case when she realized the enormity of it.

“When I learned it was 130,000 vehicles per week, you have species that will be knocked off the globe,” she said. “It's like a life. And they are so beautiful. We have these jewels here and as St. Francis said, you do what you can.”

Even with the support of her husband Jeff, it's hard working on the case at home as her children, 11 and seven, vie for her attention.

“There have been some times when I’m on a very important phone call and I tell them, do not fight,” she said with a smile. “I tell them, endangered species are counting on us.”

Ojibway Gala

A gala to raise money for the legal case to protect Ojibway Prairie will be Feb. 26 at The Room at 255 Ouellette Ave. Tickets are \$25 and can be bought in advance at Chanoso’s on Ouellette and Cardoba’s Coffee House on Malden Road in LaSalle. Call 519-978-3590 for more details.

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