

To:	Warden Matrosovs and Members of Grey County Council
Committee Date:	March 13, 2025
Subject / Report No:	PDR-CW-18-25
Title:	Rail Trail Parking Options
Prepared by:	Sarah Johnson
Reviewed by:	Scott Taylor
Lower Tier(s) Affected:	City of Owen Sound, Municipality of Meaford, Township of Chatsworth, Municipality of Grey Highlands, Municipality of West Grey, Township of Southgate.

Recommendation

1. That Report PDR-PCD-18-25 be received; and
2. That the snow removal and associated budget for plowing at the Markdale CP Rail Trail lot be considered as part of 2026 budget discussions.

Executive Summary

At the February 13, 2025 Committee of the Whole meeting, resolution CW17-25 was passed that requested staff prepare a report on options for snow removal for the Grey County owned parking lot in Markdale adjacent to the CP Rail Trail and other alternative parking options.

This report provides some background on parking lot maintenance, and investigations staff have completed to date, as well as options for Council’s consideration, both for 2025 and beyond. If direction provided from Council is to resume plowing the Markdale lot in 2025, there are options to fund snow clearing from the trails reserve for the remainder of this year. Given the limited winter season left in 2025, staff are recommending that plowing for this lot be considered as part of the 2026 budget discussions.

Background and Discussion

During budget discussions for 2024, the budget line for clearing lots related to recreational uses was reduced. This resulted in the removal of clearing snow at the parking lot in Markdale. The motion that was passed at the December 15, 2023 meeting stated:

“That the funding for contracted snow removal for the Markdale and Kolapore parking lots be set at \$20,000 in the 2024 budget.”

There was considerable discussion at the Council meeting regarding trimming this budget line, focusing mostly on the Markdale parking lot. Staff took this direction and based on this discussion, snow clearing funds were allocated solely to the lot at Kolapore (i.e., the \$20,000 allocated was not enough to clear snow in both Kolapore and Markdale). Based on an existing contract with a plowing contractor, the County kept both lots clear for the remainder of winter 2024 i.e., January – March 2024. However, starting in the winter of 2024/2025, the County has only been contracting snow removal services in the Kolapore lot, not the Markdale lot adjacent to the CP Rail Trail.

Staff have investigated options for clearing this Markdale lot. The Municipality of Grey Highlands and the County do not have capacity to clear the lot using existing equipment and staff. District 9 of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs also does not have the ability to fund clearing or obtain the insurance coverage to clear the lot as part of their agreement.

It is also worth noting that insurance coverage for snow removal contractors has been a discussion that has been brought forward multiple times at the Outdoor Management Group. Organizations are struggling to find operators that can take on the smaller recreational lots. Contractors that had previously been clearing these lots are now finding it cost prohibitive to afford the insurance coverage required and therefore are not able to take on the contracts for many smaller lots throughout the County.

With significant snowfall this year, the winter use of the Rail Trail by snowmobiles has increased in comparison to recent years. This has resulted in a demand for amenities along the trail, specifically related to parking and staging (loading and unloading of snowmobiles). The discontinuation of the winter parking lot maintenance in Markdale, at the County-owned lot, has been identified as a deficiency by snowmobile users.

In 2024, to complete an existing contract, the lot at Markdale was cleared in January, February, and March, and the clearing for those months was \$7,304.72; previous years are also listed in Table 1 below for reference.

Table 1: Snow Clearing Costs for the CP Rail Trail Parking Lot in Markdale 2021 – 2024

2021			2022		
Jan-Mar	Nov-Dec	Total	Jan-Mar	Nov-Dec	Total
\$ 1,892.73	\$ 1,913.09	\$ 3,805.82	\$ 5,454.33	\$ 4,131.02	\$ 9,585.35
2023			2024		
Jan-Mar	Nov-Dec	Total	Jan-Mar	Nov-Dec	Total
\$ 8,199.80	\$ 1,820.86	\$ 10,020.66	\$ 7,304.72	\$ -	\$ 7,304.72

Conversations with purchasing staff and the former contractor have indicated that they would be willing to resume clearing of this lot for a cost of \$150 per clearing and \$85 per salt/sand application in 2025.

To understand the financial impact of this, staff have used the parking lot at the Kolapore County Forest which is currently being maintained, as a comparator. In December 2024 the Kolapore parking lot was plowed and sanded 15 times and sanded without plowing 3 times. Using a similar number of plowing/sanding incidences, it is estimated that for December 2024, the Markdale lot would have cost \$3,780 + tax. In January 2025, the Kolapore parking lot was plowed and sanded 15 times and plowed without sanding 4 times. Using a similar number of plowing/sanding incidences, it is estimated that for January 2025, the Markdale lot would have cost \$4,125 + tax. At the time of composing this report staff had not received the February invoice. However, the weather has been similar to January so it could be estimated that it would be a similar cost for the month of February. If the County had maintained the Markdale lot for all of 2025, based on the above assumptions, clearing the lot in Markdale would have cost ~\$20,000 (not knowing what the remainder of the year would look like from a snow removal perspective).

Resuming snow clearing now for the Markdale lot for the remainder of 2025 would have lesser impacts, given the limited winter months left in 2025 (i.e., some of March, April, November, and December). Should Council direct staff to resume plowing the lot in 2025, it would need to be funded through the Trails Reserve. Staff estimate that an upset limit of \$10,000 from reserves should suffice for the remainder of 2025. The second option would be to not plow the lot for the remainder of 2025 and re-evaluate this expense during budget discussions for 2026.

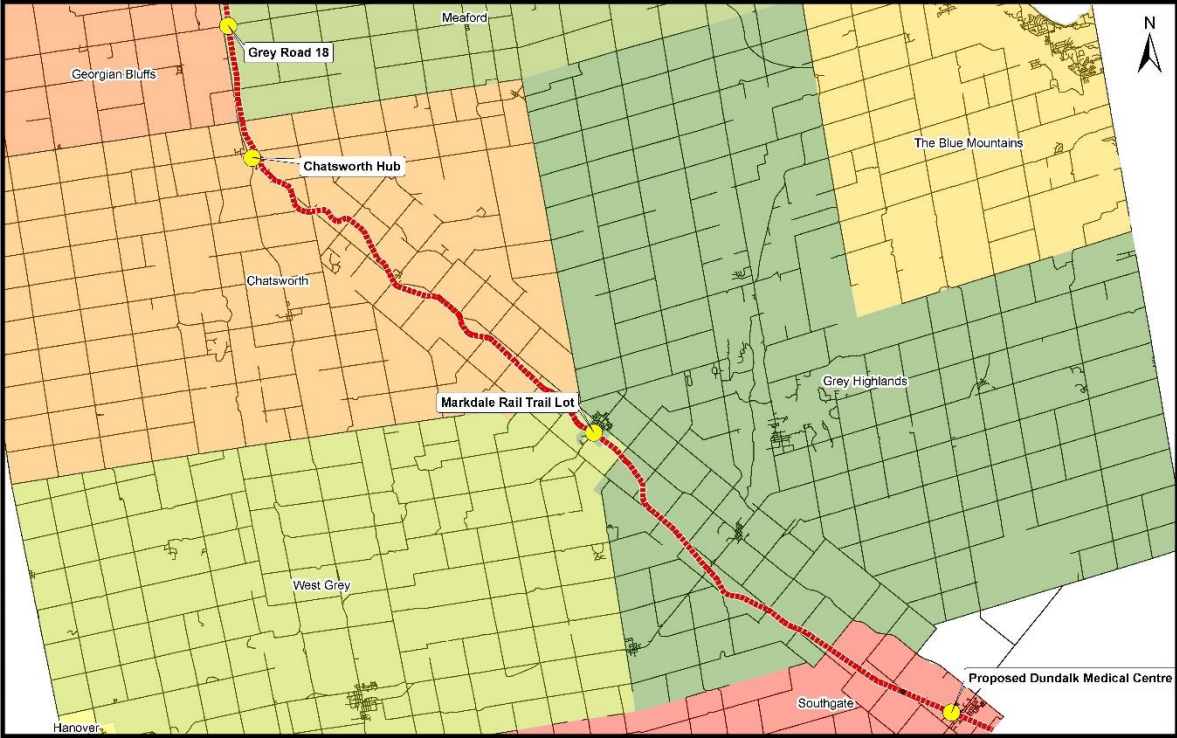
If snow clearing lot maintenance is resumed this winter, getting it to a quality where it can be maintained for the remainder of the season, given the significant snowfall so far in 2025, could be difficult. That said, the former contractor did indicate that they would be willing to resume the clearing and that would arguably indicate that they could accomplish this.

Existing Parking

Based on Council’s direction, staff have also investigated other parking locations along the entirety of the CP Rail Trail for those using the trail in the winter months, specifically for snowmobile use. Parking areas that have a direct trail connection or that are immediately adjacent to the Rail Trail are limited. There are a number of roadside options, as well as dead ends, but nothing that is maintained for these purposes, nor do they provide significant space for more than one or two vehicles. Some of these on-road options can also be difficult from a road plowing perspective, and are not encouraged (i.e., plows may have difficulty in plowing the roads, or could block parked cars with snow clearing after a heavy snow fall).

For County-owned lots, there is the recently constructed lot in Rockford at Grey Road 18, as well as the Markdale lot near the old Chapman’s site, neither are currently maintained in the winter months. Alternatively, there are a few municipally owned options including the Chatsworth Hub site, and the proposed area at the Dundalk Medical Centre which is not yet available. The Township of Chatsworth have confirmed that they do maintain the Hub site for this type of use, but there is not a direct link to the trail from this location. Staff are aware that there are other businesses or municipal parking lots that people may be using for their snowmobile trips, including local hotel/motels, the Bayshore Community Centre in Owen Sound, etc.

Map 1 below, shows the parking areas noted above along the CP Rail Trail.



Map1: Parking Along the Rail Trail

Other options for Consideration

Paid Parking

The consideration for paid parking is something that has been discussed as an option for the County's trail users. This model is used by some organizations which manage parking lots and trails such as conservation authorities, and some member municipalities.

Requiring payment to park to access the Rail Trail or County Forests is financially limiting for some users, and as a result has not been implemented or investigated thoroughly to date. Depending on the revenue generated, a paid parking system may help generate some revenue for parking lot maintenance. One of the challenges with a paid model, is that if the County commits to maintaining the parking lots, then that must be done, even if there is limited snowfall and the snowmobile trails are not open. For example, in speaking with local snowmobile clubs, last winter the CP Rail Trail was only formally open as a groomed trail for approximately two weeks, however the County was maintaining the parking lot for the whole winter. If paid parking were to be set up, it would likely be done year-round, versus just during the winter months.

Should staff be directed, more research could be done on this requirement. Some of the further measures to be investigated would need to be (a) cost to set up the infrastructure, (b) payment / pass options, and (c) enforcement options.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship or a donation is also an option for a local business or organization. This could allow for the County to continue to offer the service, but have the payment donated by the community. However, this could be difficult to maintain, as costs can increase year after year and organization/businesses may not be able to guarantee the amount year after year. This option could also place staff in challenging situations in trying to solicit donations from private businesses, who may already be struggling in the current economic climate, to maintain public infrastructure. Staff worry that soliciting for such donations, could take a significant amount of staff time, and yield limited to no results.

In accordance with the Sponsorship policy, staff would note that any sponsorship over \$2,000.00 would require a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or a legally binding contract.

The sponsorship option can be investigated further, should Council direct as such, but it has not been thoroughly investigated to date.

Corporate Facilities Management

The County's 2025 budget includes hiring a corporate Facilities Manager, which is a new position to be filled later this year. The issue of corporate snow clearing, across the County's many parking lots, may be something in which they could assist with investigating further to recommend some best practices / approaches. If appropriate, it's something that could be discussed with them shortly after their onboarding.

Staff Recommendation

Given the unpredictability of any given winter season, and the significant snowfall in this season, staff are recommending that additional funding for plowing is re-evaluated as part of budget deliberations in 2026.

Financial and Resource Implications

If there is an appetite to clear snow in the County's Markdale parking lot for the remainder of 2025, it could be funded from the Trails Reserve to an upset limit of \$10,000. Should demand exceed this amount, it would also need to come from the Trails Reserve. This reserve is estimated to have a balance of \$57,895 at the end of 2025.

Should Council direct this snow clearing matter to be considered as part of the 2026 budget, staff could include this in the draft budget as an additional levy expense.

The 2025 approved budget includes \$22,000 for snow clearing the Kolapore parking lot.

Relevant Consultation

- ☒ Internal: Finance staff, Clerks, Legal Services, Transportation Services, Economic Development Tourism and Culture, CAO/Deputy CAO
- ☒ External: Municipality of Grey Highlands, Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs: District 9, Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, and Outdoor Management Group

Appendices and Attachments

None.