

# '400' officially open for visitors

by Sandy Casselman

Press staff

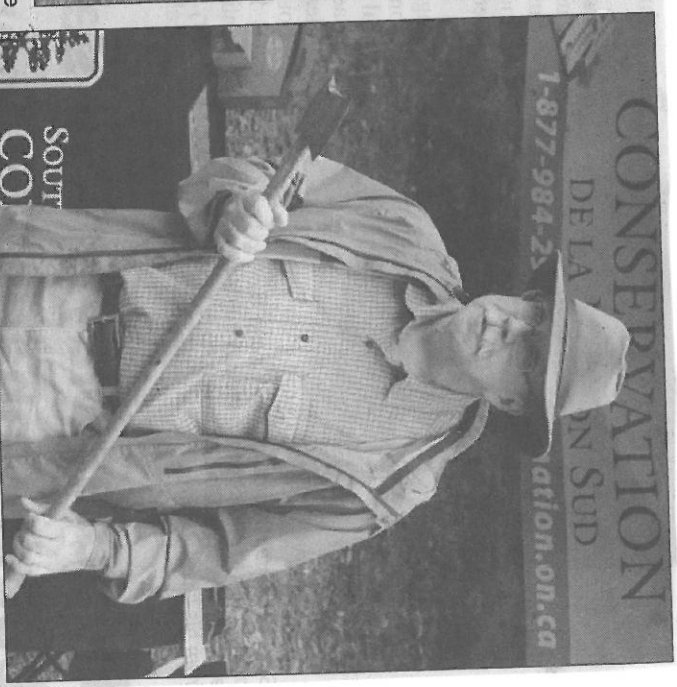
WILLIAMSBURG — The Municipality of South Dundas' once controversial "400" has officially become the Williamsburg Forest Conservation Area.

Representatives from the township, along with those from South Nation Conservation (SNC) and the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), gathered at the northern outskirts of the property Fri., Aug. 22 to celebrate the historical event.

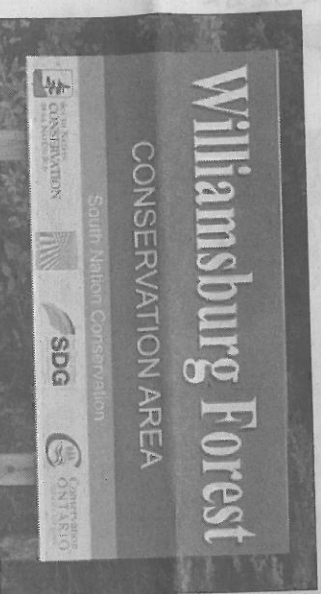
In a brief review of how the partnership developed, Mayor Steven Byvelds told the story of how council planned to sell the 400-acre property as surplus roughly three years ago, only to discover strong opposition from the public. Following a reversal of their decision to sell, council members eventually agreed



South Nation Conservation (SNC), in partnership with the Municipality of South Dundas and the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), officially opened the Williamsburg Forest Conservation Area Fri., Aug. 22. Preparing for the official ribbon-cutting ceremony are SNC general manager Dennis O'Grady, Brian Bartley, Mayor Steven Byvelds, SNC chair Bill Smirle, MNR representative Jeff Ward, and SNC past chair Lawrence Levere.



Brian Bartley spoke to the crowd about the forest's local history, sharing stories about the people who have ventured into its depths throughout the years.



to give the land to SNC provided it remains open for use by the public. (The land is to revert to South Dundas, should SNC decide to "sell" in the

future. As well, SNC is set to pay taxes on the property to the municipality.)

Looking back, it was the former Williamsburg Township that purchased the land in 1961, as part of the province's Agreement Forest Family program, whereby the MNR managed the forest. It was purchased for roughly \$1,716, Jeff Ward, MNR's

acting resource management supervisor for the Kemptonville district, said. In 1995, with the dissolution of the program, the property came

under South Dundas' control. "[The Williamsburg Forest] is an excellent example of how the public lands can be maintained for the public good," Ward said.

The land is open to the community for all sorts of purposes, including hunting, which requires a permit from SNC. Summer student Ben Gal-

lant, a fourth-year forestry student at the University of British Columbia, was tasked with traversing the entirety of the forest and cataloguing the various types of wildlife and trees inhabiting the area.

He also provided a map of the various trails, water sources, and habitats currently existing within the 400-acre expanse.

Jim Hendry, SNC property team lead, said the forest is 83 per cent wetland, with provincially and regionally significant areas documented. "We're quite blessed to have that much wetland in our area," he said.

As well, Hendry noted there are two White Spruce plantations taking up roughly 25 acres, with approximately 25 different species of trees identified throughout the greenspace. There is also a diverse population of wildlife, including a small herd of moose, roaming the property. Local resident and avid forest supporter Brian Bartley shared stories of the many



SNC project team lead Jim Hendry (left) and summer student Ben Gallant showed guests the locations of various waterways, wetlands, White Spruce plantations, and wildlife using an aerial map of the 400-acre property.

memory-making opportunities the forest has offered its visitors throughout the years, from youngsters traipsing to the middle of the forest to find the "tremendous crops of huckleberries" to those

who now use it for all-terrain vehicle rides.

"In 50 years, hopefully there will be another group saying 'you know, you guys did the right thing back then,'" Bartley said.