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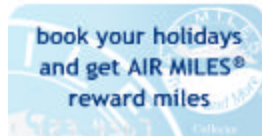
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ATV heaven

ATVs get their own 3,000-hectare park in New Hampshire

By ANNE SAUNDERS -- Associated Press

Almost from the moment the state approved buying land for a state park for all-terrain vehicles, the phones began ringing in City Hall.

Some callers wanted to know if the trails were open, others want to know if they could buy land nearby, said town planner Pam Laflamme.

State parks Director Allison McLean found herself peppered with questions at a regional meeting of state park directors -- many of whom are struggling with growing demand for ATV trails in their own states.

As city and state officials are learning, you don't even have to build it before they come.

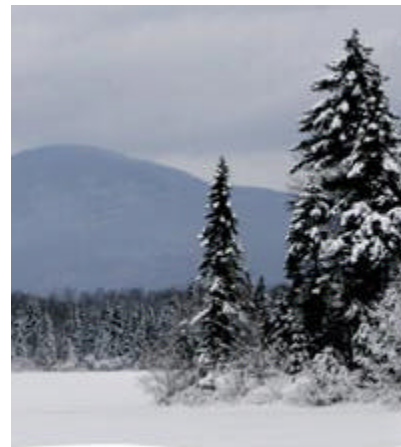
The purchase, which should be final by the end of January, would create a 3,000-hectare state park with the potential for 563 kilometres of trails for ATVs. The first trails, on existing logging roads, could open as early as this spring, officials say.

The park will be the first of its kind in New England. The closest similar park is in West Virginia, though one is planned for a former strip mine in Cambria County in western Pennsylvania.

New Hampshire riders have long complained they have few places to ride, and conflicts between riders and private landowners have risen as ATV popularity has soared.

When the state last raised registrations fees, it promised some of the money would go toward trail development. But resistance to adding ATV trails to existing state parks like Bear Brook stymied those efforts.

Then a logging company offered land in Berlin, and state saw an opportunity to meet the demand in an area that welcomes ATVs. Even groups that have long opposed ATVs figure they're better off in an isolated area of Berlin than elsewhere in the state.

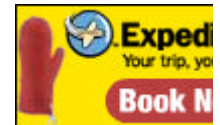


Jericho Lake and surrounding mountains in Berlin, N.H. The state plans to purchase the land and create a new 7,500-acre state park for all-terrain vehicles with the potential for 350 miles of trails. (AP Photo/Jim Cole)



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The city is donating 120 hectares around Jericho Lake that will come equipped with bathrooms and parking. The state plans to improve the area this spring and open it to swimmers, boaters and other users this summer, according to McLean.

The park will be slightly larger than Crawford Notch State Park and more than twice the size of Monadnock State Park, but smaller than Bear Brook, in Allenstown.

Logging has removed most of the old growth, but many smaller trees remain and the hilly layout gives a sense of privacy as the road rises and falls. Most of the park is west of Route 110, but there are 650 hectares on the east side, near Head Pond.

Steve Dayton operates a multimillion-dollar business renting ATVs at Pismo Beach, Calif. When he heard from family about the planned park, he saw a business opportunity and flew east to learn more.

That's music to the ears of Mayor Bob Danderson, to whom the park represents a chance to turn his blue-collar city into a tourist destination and to reduce its historic reliance on a single industry, pulp and paper.

The area already attracts snowmobilers in winter, but Danderson believes ATVs will be an even bigger, year-round business. Driving down Route 110, he points at potential sites for new hotels, stores, restaurants and cabins, all feeding the local economy.

"This is the start of the next big recreational sport in New Hampshire," he predicted.

Jim Bird, who is active in the New Hampshire Off-Highway Vehicle Association, agrees.

"I think it's going to be huge," said Bird, whose group represents ATV clubs statewide.

Bird also predicts the sport will grow as the population ages and more people need motorized help to get around.

"Anything that gets people out in the woods is good," he argued. "It's so much cheaper than therapy."

Sales of ATVs grew by 28 per cent in New Hampshire between 2000 and 2002, according to trade industry figures. Sales have since dropped off, something locals attribute to the lack of opportunities to ride.

But nationally, ATV sales continue to grow. Dealer sales rose from 734,000 in 2000 to 912,000 in 2004, according to the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America.

According to information collected by the New Hampshire Off-Highway Vehicle Association, the Hatfield-McCoy Recreational Area in West Virginia draws visitors from 46 states and led to the opening of six equipment and supply stores, seven campgrounds, two hotels and three cabin-rental companies.

Berlin police Chief Peter Morency has talked to his counterpart in West Virginia, who said the park has been a great boost to the local economy.

Morency acknowledges that some ATV riders have a reputation for going off trails, causing erosion and damaging private land, but he supports the park, even though it will add to his workload.

The Appalachian Mountain Club did not oppose the park, but does want the adjacent White Mountain National Forest protected from rogue riders. McLean said the U.S. Forest Service will have a say in how trails are laid out to protect the national forest from motorized intrusion.

But Morency said visiting riders probably won't cause the problems.

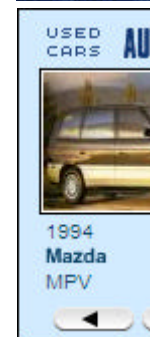
"People don't come up here to break the law on purpose," he said. The problem is more likely to be locals taking shortcuts, he predicted.

The park will not be exclusive to ATVs. The state plans to provide for other users -- snowmobilers, skiers, hikers, boaters, hunters, mountain bikers, and dog sledgers among others, McLean said. She said officials are discussing building a campground and cabins to generate revenue, as the state does in other parks.

The 133-year-old Nansen Ski Club is among the groups hoping to use the park, but members are concerned about mixing with ATVs.

"ATVs and cross-country skiing have historically not been compatible uses," said vice-president Gerry Berthiaume. "We would like a dedicated area."

While some areas will be targeted for nonmotorized use, McLean said the state will encourage different groups of users to "share with care."



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Even ATVers fall into groups with different interests.

"They're going to want touring trails for the moms and pops" but rougher, steeper terrain for hotshots, Bird said. "With that much land, there'll be room for everything," he predicted.

McLean promised there will be broad opportunities for the public to help plan the park. But right now, no one is arguing and anything seems possible.

"It's very exciting," she said. "How often does a director get in on the ground floor and get to develop a park?"

If You Go...

Jerico Lake ATV Park: Proposed state park for ATV use, in Berlin, N.H., could open as early as this spring; <http://www.jericholakeatvpark.com/> or the state Bureau of Trails, <http://www.nhtrails.org> or (603) 271-3254.

Hatfield-McCoy Trails: Lyburn, W.Va.; <http://www.trailsheaven.com/> or (800) 592-2217.

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