

GTA

# It's taken years for the city to close a tiny gap in this 65-km public trail. The trouble? A 110-year-old private golf course lies in the way

Toronto has finally decided to expropriate part of the Weston Golf and Country Club, a private course that has been open since 1915.

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Dave Bennett, vice-president of the Weston Village Residents' Association, on the steep 80-step staircase that marks the 800 m gap in the 65 km multi-use Humber River Trail.

Andres Valenzuela Toronto Star

By Alyshah Hasham City Hall Bureau

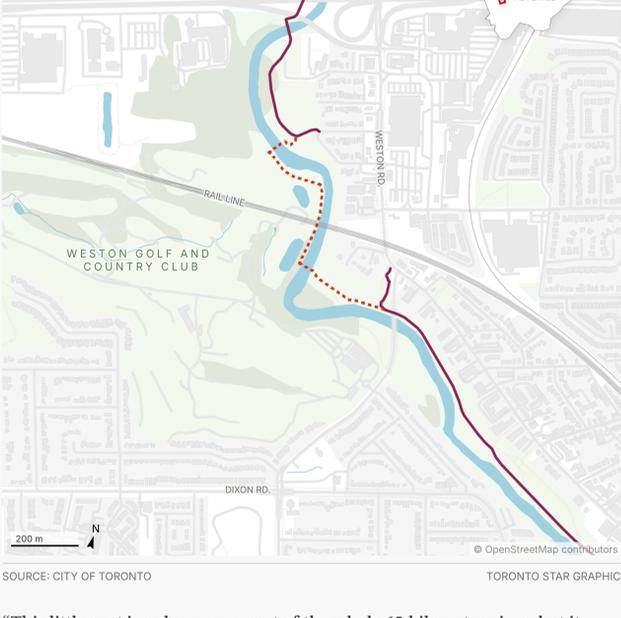
A young family are biking along the scenic Humber River trail when they see it: the staircase.

To continue north along the path, they would have to haul their bikes up 80 steep and sometimes slippery metal steps, a tall order even with a bike channel on one side.

Welcome to the 800-metre gap in the Humber Trail. A long-time thorn in the city's side that will likely cost millions to fix and could require drastic changes to the signature hole of a local golf course.

As it stands now, this trail break might as well be a dead end. If a cyclist makes it up those steps and out of the ravine into Mallaby Park, they'd have to navigate busy Weston Road for just under a kilometre until returning to the Humber trail in Crawford-Jones Memorial Park.

## Minding the mid-Humber gap



SOURCE: CITY OF TORONTO

TORONTO STAR GRAPHIC

"This little spot is only one per cent of the whole 65-kilometre piece, but it might as well be 99 per cent," said Dave Bennett, vice-chair of the Weston Village Resident's Association.

The benefits to closing the gap are myriad, connecting a network of public trails and parks along the Humber River. Advocates like Bennett say future generations will thank the city. But then there is the cost, which includes a plan to expropriate some riverside land belonging to the Weston Golf and Country Club, in order to navigate the steep ravine walls the trail must wend through.

The tension between golf courses and the growing need for publicly accessible space is a familiar one in Toronto. Advocates have pushed the city to consider turning its own golfing facilities into green spaces everyone can use. The Humber River trail is also not the only multi-use trail interrupted by fairways and putting greens — the Etobicoke Creek trail has a road detour around Markland Wood Golf Club.

### Cost of expropriation

But actually expropriating private golf course land to connect a public trail not only takes significant time and resources, it also raises an ethical question, said Matti Siemiatycki, a professor of geography and planning at the University of Toronto.

"What scale of public good is required?" he said. Can it justify the cost to the course — and to the public purse.

The city's preferred solution, produced after a feasibility study and an environmental assessment, would keep the path going in the ravine along the west bank of the Humber River. A pedestrian-cycle bridge would cross the river at each end of the new path, that would also include a cantilevered boardwalk. Part of the required riverside land is owned by a private land trust. The rest is owned by the Weston Golf and Country Club, a private course that has been open since 1915.

On a cold winter morning Rob Ackermann, the golf club's general manager looked down from the tee of the second hole: "The Long Drop," so-called for a dramatic slope down to river-level, with two greens nestled before a train bridge.

A pedestrian-cycle bridge would cross the river so the raised boardwalk would run alongside the hole, somewhere between the fairway and the west bank of the river, descending to a river-side trail.



A proposed city of Toronto multi-use path would cut across the property of the Weston Golf and Country Club.

Andrew Francis Wallace Toronto Star

Ackermann has many concerns about the city's plan. Some are for the impact on the golf course. Would it require moving a green, the pond and expensive irrigation systems that go with it? How much land would be needed and what impact would the construction process have on the course. How would the new path be covered to protect users from errant golf balls?

### Fears of a flood

But, he said, his primary concern is danger from the river itself.

He's worked in the area for decades and has seen multiple floods, including one in 2014 "that destroyed us." He worries path users could be trapped and endangered from debris that could collect in the supporting beams of the boardwalk. An image from 1954's Hurricane Hazel that Ackermann submitted in a deputation shows how high the waters can get.

"The path is going to get repeatedly damaged," he said. "They're going to need to access our property, the mentally repair the structure, disrupt our business and we have to clean up the mess that's left over. And the taxpayers, we pay for it every time."

The golf course has sought second opinions on the city's plan, which Ackermann said is flawed, and has touted its own suggestion — carving a path along the steep slope on the east side of the bank, keeping the trail from needing to cross the river at all.



An image of Hurricane Hazel flooding submitted to council by Weston Golf and Country Club manager Rob Ackermann

Rob Ackermann

But the idea has failed to land with the city. When raised at council's general government committee, staff said the concept was reviewed and found to be "technically unfeasible" and not necessarily any cheaper.

After a council vote in November, the city is now pushing forward with phase one of a plan to land the necessary land from the golf course and neighbouring land trust.

"It's such a small project ... it is amazing it has taken so long," said local councillor Frances Nunziata. She is unconvinced by the golf club's warnings and remains confident the city can work with them to address their specific concerns.

She notes that closing the trail gap is also an essential part of the city's Weston Loop plan to connect a 74-acre stretch of five parks in the Humber valley, which was approved by council in mid-December.

Coun. Stephen Holyday, who represents the neighbouring ward of Etobicoke-Centre, said land expropriation is a "heavy-handed" action that might be necessary, but needs to come after due diligence. If that isn't done "it can affect people's confidence in government," he said.

Most city expropriations are fairly minor, he said, like taking a sliver of someone's yard. "This parcel of land is of extremely high value to the club," he said.

He would have liked to see more consideration of the golf course's alternative proposal, and of its concerns about the trail going through its business — he points to city staff finding ways to add bike lanes without removing vehicle lanes after a provincial mandate as an example of compromises being possible.

The expropriation process could take years, depending on whether it is contested by the golf course. A second report would then need to go to city council.

Once the expropriation is complete, city staff would then be able to go on-site to do the additional design work that should address many of the golf club's concerns, staff said at the general government committee hearing.

### Cost of filling the gap

All told, the gap might finally be closed sometime in 2029 or 2030, a city spokesperson said. The trail construction alone is estimated at \$10 million, not counting the further design work needed.

The estimated cost of the land expropriation is confidential at this time, the spokesperson said. But land costs can be unpredictable too — in a striking case the Ontario Land Tribunal ordered Metrolinx to pay \$24 million more than offered for a Liberty Village property needed for Ontario Line construction.

The city has previously expropriated land to complete multi-use trail connections, but none of those expropriations have involved golf course properties, a spokesperson said.

Like Nunziata, Dave Bennett is not concerned about the flood risk. Much of the trail is located within the flood plain already, he said.

"I take a lot of people that are not from the city down to the Humber River. Always, within 15 minutes, I can't believe we are still in Toronto. It's a total other experience down there."

To him, the long-term public good will be worth the price.

"Everything that's difficult to do, it's always worth it for the greater good," he said.



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