

# What the future holds for Mooney's Bay Beach and its sledding hill

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Apr 12, 2026

Mooney's Bay Beach has always been a summertime destination. There's the annual dragon boat festival in June, concerts, volleyball, barbecues and lots of swimming. But when winter approaches and the cantinas shut down, there isn't much activity besides some cross-country skiers on the trails.

Now, the city is looking to change that and is considering reopening the sledding hill. The hill was a popular sledding spot, but it has been fenced off for years after the tragic death of 11-year-old Josée Abi Assal, who lost her life after colliding with a metal signpost while tobogganing.

City council has since directed staff to study whether the hill could safely reopen with modifications. A public information session held recently brought residents together to review three potential design approaches, ranging from smaller modifications focused primarily on sledding to a larger concept that would support multiple winter uses, including skiing.

"There is very high-level support to have that hill open," River Ward Coun. Riley Brockington told the Lookout. "In all my years championing this item, I've come across basically a handful of people who would prefer to see it closed in the winter."

However, since the initial three proposals were tabled, their estimated costs have been growing.



An open house was held on March 30 at Riverside United Church where the public was able to give feedback on their preferred options.  
Photo by Charlie Senack.

Option A, estimated at \$3.5 million, would create a 14.6-metre-high “thrill hill” with an 18-per-cent grade, relocate the cross-country ski training hill to the north slope and add fencing and vegetation to restrict access to unsafe areas.

Option B, estimated at \$1.75 million, proposes a smaller 5.7-metre “bunny hill” with a gentler 13-per-cent slope and a 40-metre runout zone, while keeping the existing cross-country ski training hill in its current location.

Finally, Option C would combine both the thrill hill and bunny hill along with the cross-country ski training hill, but it comes at a cost of \$4.25 million.

There is also the option of doing nothing, and keeping the hill closed for winter use.

But Brockington is hopeful that won’t be the case after seeing strong support for the proposals. His preferred option is the third because it would utilize the hill to its full potential.

“If you want the hill to be accessible and improve safety for not just tobogganing, but skiing and all the events that take place there and you’re going to spend the money, do it right the first time so we don’t have to revisit this five or 10 years from now,” he said.

No funding has yet been approved, and council would still need to decide whether to move ahead with construction.

Dave Coyle, president of the Riverside Park Community Association, said the loss of the hill has been felt across the community and beyond.

Even though there are fences and signs to deter tobogganers, he said people still find ways to use the hill. As an added precaution, sandbags are placed around signs and posts in case anyone were to sled into them.

While supportive of reopening the site, he said questions remain about the cost and how the redesigned hill would operate.

“This hill has been there since 1965,” he told the Lookout. “It has operated without incident, and it’s been completely free. Now, to make it safe, we are told we have to spend \$4.5 million.”

When the hill was first created out of construction infill in the 1960s, it was originally branded as a ski hill before later becoming widely used for tobogganing. In 1971, the recreation and parks

department considered installing a ski tow that would have been operated by a private vendor. The plans never moved forward.

### **More changes to come**

The future of the hill is only one part of a broader discussion now underway about the long-term role of Mooney's Bay as a year-round destination.

In 2025, the city brought forward two options to replace the current pavilion, which was built in 1965 and houses the washrooms and a canteen. It could be one or two storeys and include an indoor lifeguarding station, meeting rooms and upgraded amenities.

Coyle said the two projects should be planned together and expressed the need for recreational space in the Riverside Park neighbourhood, which currently lacks a community centre.

No timelines or costs have been announced for the new pavilion.

The area around Mooney's Bay is expected to see rapid change in the coming decades, and Coyle said the beach should see investment to keep pace.

Work is currently underway on the Confederation Heights Secondary Plan, which will set a roadmap for how the current federal lands should be developed. Many of the existing vacant office buildings will be converted into housing, with ambitious plans to build high-rises and green spaces, and it is estimated that 20,000 to 30,000 residents could one day live there.

Coyle said access to the site — particularly from transit — will become more important as the area grows. Currently, it's about a 20-minute walk from the Mooney's Bay light-rail station to the beach.

"We really haven't accommodated for the active transportation to get from Mooney station to the beach," he said. "It's interesting to watch people park at the post office and struggle to get to the beach with their carts and families."

Under the current Confederation Heights Secondary Plan draft, the parking lots at Canada Post would be converted to green space.

### **History of the beach**

Mooney's Bay itself is not a natural shoreline feature.

The widened section of the Rideau River was created in the 1830s during construction of the Rideau Canal, when engineers built a dam and lock system to bypass the rapids at Hog's Back Falls, creating calmer water suitable for navigation and recreation.

The area later took its name from the Mooney family, who served as lockmasters at nearby Narrows Lock for nearly nine decades across three generations. Michael Mooney and his son held the post between 1856 and 1894, followed by Michael Edmund "Ebb" Mooney, who served from 1897 until 1946.

Long before it was a beach, the area was part of rural Ottawa and home to the McMahon farm. Where the Terry Fox Athletic Facility is located today was once part of Bailey's Orchard and Greenhouse.

The original beach first opened in 1936 and was situated near the Hog's Back Bridge. At the time, it lacked proper sanitary facilities, and neighbours complained of beachgoers doing their business in the bushes.

In 1952, after the federal government invested in the neighbouring Hog's Back Park, it requested the beach move to its current site. The old one was listed as "unrelieved and ugly," according to a 1959 Ottawa Citizen article, with the sand often being washed away by currents, and it was the site of multiple drownings.

