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Update August 18, 2026: What doesn't kill you, doesn't always make you stronger.

Tomorrow I will share my story of the 9 years of fighting Tay Valley Township: "The Cost of Winning"

Please share.

April 17, 2026

Thank you to Meghan Balogh of the Kingston Whig-Standard for taking the time to listen and share our story.

PERTH — On a pastoral two acres just outside the town of Perth, a small gang of kids is running amok in the mud.

They're covered head to foot in water-resistant clothes and rubber boots, and they're digging, playing, and carrying out their own playful dramas under the quiet watchful eyes of two teachers.

There are three goats and six chickens nearby, play structures, an orchard, a garden, and a "wild zone" designated entirely to their purposes of the day — however those purposes change.

These are the Wednesday kids of the Blueberry Creek Forest School and Nature Centre, a Reggio-inspired not-for-profit outdoor learning program designed to supplement kids' primary education — about half the kids who attend one day a week are homeschooled, and half are enrolled in area schools.

Kids splash in water at the Blueberry Creek Forest School and Nature Centre near Perth on Wednesday, April 15, 2026. PHOTO BY MEGHAN BALOGH /The Kingston Whig-Standard

More than 400 children have gone through the forest school program since its opening in 2017. They play outside, they read books, make art and carpentry projects, they learn to cook and learn how to be curious about the world through their interactions with one another and their instructors — two full-time staff trained in the forest school model.

Much of the forest school is built on principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, an educational philosophy that sees kids as "active protagonists in their growing processes," according to the method's

official website, with the goal of creating environments for kids to experience a sense of autonomy in learning.

The program is offered on a sliding scale, with bursaries available to kids whose families can't afford to pay for the one-day-per-week access.

The project began, and continues, as a labour of love for founder Robyn Mulcahy, who bought the former bed and breakfast in early 2017 and set to work renovating the century log building and addition into something bright, clean and welcoming that could provide a space for kids to learn valuable life skills and character. She had her own grandchildren in mind as she developed the plan.

"We need kids who can think on their feet, who feel confident, who are kind," Mulcahy said in an interview with the Whig on Wednesday.

"It's turned out better than I ever expected for the school itself."

Mulcahy founded the school but doesn't work there, and draws no salary or payment of any kind, but deep satisfaction for the impact that the not-for-profit is making in children's lives daily.

But beneath the daily joyful chaos at the forest school, another type of drama has been unfolding, one that has left Mulcahy feeling betrayed by her municipality, who has taken her to court multiple times in an apparent effort to shut her down completely through ongoing litigation.

Before buying the property, Mulcahy spoke with township planners about the project she was hoping to establish and was told that her Commercial C zoning would allow for her forest school, which would fall under community service or recreation.

She renovated, established her not-for-profit organization and the forest school opened its doors on Sept. 4, 2017. Not long after, Mulcahy was issued a permit by Tay Valley Township to demolish and rebuild a small art studio on the property.

By November, near the project's completion, the township had issued a stop work order, and the local conservation authority became involved.

Eventually Mulcahy was required to demolish her new educational building, which had been issued permits to be built on the existing footprint of a former building.

A year later, the conservation authority sent Mulcahy a letter saying that if she continued any work on the building that they didn't authorize, they had the right to put her in jail or issue a hefty fine.

Mulcahy said after reading the letter, she vomited.

"I couldn't believe they were threatening to throw me in jail for something that I'd gotten permission every step along the way," she said.

Conflict didn't end there. The township began to question whether Mulcahy's zoning permitted her to run a school on the property. After clarification was provided demonstrating that Blueberry Creek isn't a school in the regular sense, as defined by the township's by-law, Mulcahy discovered through a freedom-of-information request communications between Tay Valley Township staff and an independent planner that they hired to rewrite the definition of school in the township's by-laws, so that "the Blueberry Creek school would be covered under this definition".

The township has also argued that Blueberry Creek wasn't a community service, Mulcahy said, a permissible use under her property's zoning.

"Their argument was that we could only promote education, not actually deliver it," Mulcahy wrote on her website.

Mulcahy has made many freedom-of-information requests to Tay Valley Township and the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority. She says that to date, there are 998 pages that have been withheld.

In June 2025, Tay Valley Township served Mulcahy legal documents stating they were suing her for running an Airbnb in the building that was formerly a bed and breakfast when she bought it.

The building is an indoor learning space for kids from Monday to Friday, but is available for weekend stays and during the summer months as a short-term rental on Airbnb. The money earned through those rentals supports the costs of the school.

Despite meeting the township's definition as a hotel, permitted by their Commercial C zoning, the township has told Mulcahy that the property also meets the definition of a cabin or lodge, which is not allowed in the 100-year floodplain.

Mulcahy's property wasn't designated as a floodplain by the local conservation authority at the time she purchased it, but only a year after the forest school opened.

“I didn’t know anything about it, because we weren’t under a floodplain (when we bought the property),” Mulcahy said. “All I knew was the designation when I bought it.”

A brand new raised bridge that was completed in May 2025 is pictured at the Blueberry Creek Forest School and Nature Centre near Perth on Wednesday, April 15, 2026. PHOTO BY MEGHAN BALOGH /The Kingston Whig-Standard

The forest school and nature centre had been working on approvals for eight years to build a new bridge over the creek that provides access to the property. The old bridge was often unusable in early spring, and the forest school would relocate each spring because of it.

The new bridge was completed in May 2025 at a cost of \$136,000, built in part after the township cited concerns about the ability to evacuate in case of an emergency.

“The township had focused solely on the bridge in their affidavit as being a danger to the public, and that’s why they were shutting down our Airbnb,” Mulcahy said.

“Meanwhile, by the time they’d sent that legal letter, we finally had the bridge replaced. But they didn’t mention that anywhere.”

As she prepares to defend her right to use her property as an Airbnb in court on Thursday, Mulcahy has the receipts.

With impeccable organization, she’s kept every correspondence, freedom-of-information document, application and legal file in a three-ring binder that’s approaching several inches deep.

She’s created a definitive online timeline at a website one of the parents helped her create to build transparency around what is going on.

Mulcahy and her husband have spent \$480,000 of their personal money fighting Tay Valley Township in court over the past eight years.

“When you look at eight years of legal bills, anyone else would just be like, I give up,” Mulcahy said.

She has suffered physical consequences from the stress of the situation.

“I thought, they basically won’t stop until I’m dead. It was that kind of feeling I had, that they will just be ruthless. But who are they hurting? The community.”

Backpacks sit outside on a bench at the Blueberry Creek Forest School and Nature Centre near Perth on Wednesday, April 15, 2026. PHOTO BY MEGHAN BALOGH /The Kingston Whig-Standard

Blueberry Creek isn't the only entity fighting a legal battle with the township. According to data that Mulcahy collected from township council meeting minutes, there are nine other lawsuits underway with Tay Valley Township right now.

"I've had quite a few people that have come to me and have shared what their costs are, and it's driving them under," Mulcahy said.

"People cannot (afford this). And so the process is the punishment. As soon as there's lawyers involved, it doesn't matter if you win or lose, it's going to be painful. And that's the point."

With the forest school's ninth anniversary under its belt, Mulcahy cannot understand why the township continues to file litigation against them.

"What public good is it to be suing our operating structure?" she said, pointing out that closing the Airbnb portion of their operations won't shut down the forest school.

The irony of the situation isn't lost on Mulcahy — the fact that her own tax dollars are being used to sue her; the tax dollars of several local citizens are being used to pursue litigation against them.

"Who loses? The township residents who are paying taxes."

Questions have been raised about the township's operating practices in general. A citizen-formed website called Tay Valley Township Accountability has gathered some data pointing to a lack of transparency, accountability, and conflicts of interest.

For example, the township's solicitor is also the township's integrity commissioner, which the Ontario Ombudsman has declared to be a conflict of interest, pointing out that an integrity commissioner should have independence from municipal council and staff and shouldn't take on other roles for the municipality during their term, including acting as legal counsel.

In December 2025, Mulcahy's husband, Scott Reid, reported a \$65,000 settlement that Mulcahy received from Tay Valley Township, which he was required to federally report under the guidelines of his role as a member of parliament, where he is required to disclose spousal income.

Mulcahy herself is under a confidentiality agreement around the settlement details, but which Reid said applies to the art studio situation in 2017.

The reason I've gone public on all this is to point out that in Tay Valley Township, this is what they do," Reid said in an interview with the Whig on Friday.

"They attack citizens. They take a very aggressive interpretation of the zoning laws, and if you fight back, they just say, 'We can spend you out of court.'

"And if it turns out that the person persists and their case is actually strong enough, and they haven't given up yet, at that point the township will settle with them and require them to sign a nondisclosure agreement."

Reid said that to him, it is a pattern of behaviour.

"I thought, I'm in a unique place to actually talk about it and draw attention to this abuse of process."

Reid uncovered documents through a freedom-of-information request demonstrating that Tay Valley Township had spent \$66,000 in legal fees in an attempt to block the release of documents relating to the Blueberry Creek conflict, requested by Reid and Mulcahy under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Reid would like to see Tay Valley Township conduct themselves "the way every other municipality in the counties I represent behaves."

"Which is to say, they take a reasonable view of the law, and don't prosecute on the basis of vindictiveness, which I think explains the litigation that Robyn is currently undergoing."

A request for interview was made to Tay Valley Township staff and to the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority. Neither one made themselves available before deadline.

The kids who attend the school once a week on rotating schedules have noticed the ongoing conflict. They regularly make signs to protest the onslaught from the township, and occasionally parade them along the front lawn of the forest school property. One day, the kids and their families took their signs to the township office and pressed them against the windows, with pieces of yarrow to symbolize peace.

"I remember one kid saying, 'Why won't they come out and look at us? Why won't they come and talk to us?'" Mulcahy said.

Only days after Mulcahy bought the property that became Blueberry Creek Forest School and Nature Centre, her father passed away.

“I see Blueberry as a living tribute to him, as he struggled in mainstream education, and his life could have been different if he had been able to discover how brilliant he was,” she wrote in 2019 in an open letter to Tay Valley Township council. “He would sneak out of kindergarten to go into the woods to read the adventures of Christopher Robin. Blueberry is what I wished for my own five children, and now my grandchildren.”

Mulcahy has never drawn a salary, or income of any kind, from the project. It has fully been a labour of love, one that’s carried a lot of struggle and pain.

“It’s painful, it’s insane, and it feels like you can’t even make it up,” Mulcahy said. “It feels like a bizarre drama. People ask why we don’t give up, and I say, because then the bully wins.”

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