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Naturalist questions salamander secrecy by Record Reporter Jeff Outhit

Neil Taylor feels "absolutely vindicated" by the discovery of rare salamanders in the Hidden Valley area of south Kitchener.

But he's upset that government officials are still guarding details of the surprise discovery.

"That seems rather absurd," he said yesterday.

Taylor figures government officials are using secrecy to frustrate efforts to prevent development in Hidden Valley.

"To me, they're actually playing a game, perhaps brinkmanship," Taylor said.

"They don't want those of us who are really seriously interested in protecting it, to know its abundance, its location with respect to the project. It is frustrating."

A regional official denied that secrecy around Jefferson salamanders is a pro-development tactic. "I find that accusation to be inaccurate," said Eyad Soltan, the regional manager in charge of a proposed Hidden Valley road project.

Secrecy was demanded by the provincial government to protect a threatened species from intruders, Soltan said.

Taylor is an avid birdwatcher and former president of the Kitchener-Waterloo Field Naturalists.

He's a leading critic of proposed development in the Hidden Valley area.

"It's a priceless piece of natural heritage," he said. "What is remarkable is that it hasn't been developed up to now."

This spring, Taylor persuaded Waterloo regional government to look for Jefferson salamanders, after complaining that an earlier search was flawed.

"I kept pestering them," he said.

The spring search was undertaken with the help of Jefferson salamander experts. Last month, its results led officials to announce the discovery of a "threatened species."

The Record has confirmed the species is the Jefferson salamander.

The discovery has delayed a proposed Hidden Valley road for at least a year, pending more research. The proposed road is meant to ease chronic congestion on Fairway Road.

Officials are refusing to identify which threatened species was found, say how many were found, or reveal how close they are to the proposed road.

This makes no sense to Taylor, whose requests for more information have been denied.

Jefferson salamanders are elusive by nature and Taylor sees little risk that somebody will now go out to hunt them down.

According to a federal agency: "The species' secretive nature makes population estimates difficult."

Jefferson salamanders are protected by provincial and federal laws. Ontario law makes it illegal to kill, harass or capture the salamanders.