



TO: Community and Corporate Services Committee
FROM: Planning and Building
SUBJECT: Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System Project: Progress Report 2014

Report Number: PB-56/15

Wards Affected: 1

File Numbers: 502-02-54

Date to Committee: June 16, 2015

Date to Council: June 22, 2015

Recommendation:

1. Receive the progress report about ongoing Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System (Ecopark) activities.
2. Endorse the Ontario Government Engagement Proposal attached as Appendix One, as the basis for future discussions with the Province about special purpose legislation to recognize the Ecopark.

Purpose:

Address goal or action in strategic plan

The successful creation of the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System will assist in the protection and enhancement of Burlington's natural and cultural heritage.

Background:

Purpose of Ecopark System

The Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System is a network of 3,650 hectares (9,100 acres) of significant lands naturally connecting Hamilton and Burlington at the western end of Lake Ontario. It consists of more than 1,900 hectares (4,800 acres) of permanently protected natural lands and open space, surrounded by 1,750 hectares (4,300 acres) of privately owned lands for complementary stewardship.

Ten partner agencies, including the City of Burlington are working to protect, restore and connect these ecologically valuable lands and create a lasting legacy for future generations in our community.

The major objectives of the Ecopark are:

- Long term stewardship and joint management of existing and new public lands;
- Enhanced public education and awareness of the area's cultural and environmental significance;
- Ecological restoration to maintain species diversity; and
- Creation of a connected system of properties through the securement of additional lands using methods such as donations, purchase, dedications, easements and stewardship agreements.

**2010 Council
Direction**

On February 1, 2010 Council adopted the following resolution:

“Endorse the “Cootes to Escarpment Parks System: A Conservation and Land Management Strategy” Final Report; and

Direct staff to collaborate with partner agencies and landowners to complete the implementation actions required to secure the foundation of a Cootes to Escarpment Park System.”

**2012 Council
Direction**

On November 5, 2012 Council adopted the following resolution:

“Direct staff to continue to work with partner agencies to implement the Cootes to Escarpment Park System;

Endorse the pursuit of provincial and/or federal legislation to recognize the Cootes to Escarpment Park System, and request the participation of senior levels of government in funding and managing the Park System;

Approve in principle the contents of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) attached as Appendix II to Report PB-74/12

Direct city staff to work with Cootes to Escarpment partner agencies to finalize the MOU wording and authorize the City Manager to sign the finalized MOU on behalf of Council;

Authorize a one time financial contribution to the Cootes to Escarpment Park System Project to an upset limit of \$46,200 to be paid in installments of \$15,400 over three years and funded from the Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve Fund.”

**2013 Council
Direction**

On January 27, 2014 Council adopted the following resolution:

“Receive the progress report about ongoing Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System activities.

Authorize the naming of City owned property at 1401 Old York Road as the “Eileen and John Holland Nature Sanctuary”.

Authorize the expenditure of an additional 2014 financial contribution to the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System of \$25,000 from Account 419030 33478.”

Discussion:

Strategy/Process

Key areas of Ecopark activity in 2014/2015 have been: fundraising, natural heritage protection, community stewardship, stakeholder engagement, land securement, and senior government engagement.

Recent initiatives and next steps are summarized below.

Fundraising

In the past year, the Ecopark partnership has leveraged significant fundraising capacity in the form of three major grants.

1. The Ontario Trillium Foundation has awarded \$374,000 toward the development of comprehensive joint management plans for partner lands in the Ecopark. These funds will be allocated over the next five years.
2. The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation has awarded \$156,400 toward the development of a Landowner Outreach Program for the Ecopark. These funds will be allocated until August 2016 and fund a full-time Stewardship Technician and part time Land Securement Coordinator as well as communications costs. This grant adds to the \$65,000 already awarded by the Foundation for the completion of the Burlington Heights Management Plan
3. The Great Lakes Guardians Community Fund has awarded \$24,655 toward a series of community stewardship workshops and events to be held during 2015.

Additional grant money has also been received from Canada Summer Jobs (\$3,465 toward a 2015 summer student to assist with community stewardship workshops and events), and from Mountain Equipment Co-op (\$1,250 unsolicited community grant being used to fund an interactive trails map).

The additional January 2014 City of Burlington contribution was matched by a \$25,000 contribution from Burlington Hydro in February 2014. Together, these funds are being used for enhanced communications materials including a series of videos, road and park signage, and an illustrated vision map. They were also being used for communication consultant advice on strategies and techniques to work toward provincial or federal legislation to recognize the Ecopark.

Natural Heritage Protection

The Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System is divided into six core natural areas called Heritage Lands, which reflect their natural and cultural heritage components. Over the period 2012-2019, the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System partners will prepare comprehensive joint

management plans for each of the six Heritage Lands areas. Through completion of these Management Plans, progress will be made towards:

- harmonization of policies, regulations and land classification on Ecopark system lands;
- the creation of joint initiatives to enhance existing programs and fill gaps related to ecological restoration and protection;
- enhanced protection of important natural and cultural features and sustainable recreation, education and research opportunities.

The Management Plans will apply only to the partner-owned properties, although they may make recommendations for ways in which the partner agencies can work with neighbouring landowners, for instance to promote conservation or ecological stewardship.

Work on the Burlington Heights Management Plan was recently completed. This first Management Plan involved lands in the York Boulevard/ Valley Inn area owned by the City of Burlington, City of Hamilton and Royal Botanical Gardens. Rob Peachey, Manager of Parks & Open Space is the City's representative on the project Steering Committee and the completed Plan is being presented for approval in a separate report.

The next Management Plans to be completed in 2015 & 2016 will be for the Clappison-Grindstone and Waterdown Sassafras Woods core natural areas. Burlington lands in this study area encompass a large portion of North Aldershot including the Eileen & John Holland Nature Sanctuary, Kerncliffe, City View and Bayview Parks, as well as significant natural lands held by Conservation Halton, the Bruce Trail Conservancy, and the City of Hamilton.

Because these two Management Plans involve similar landforms and geographic areas, they are being completed concurrently. A consulting team headed by North South Environmental has been retained. Over the spring and summer, the team will be undertaking natural and cultural resource inventories and research, completing field work to confirm and augment existing information, and reviewing the current planning context for the two Management Plan areas. Public engagement and stakeholder consultation will begin in the Fall, after which the consulting team will work to identify and address management issues raised by partner agencies, stakeholders and the public.

Community Stewardship

An extensive community stewardship program, funded by Great Lakes Guardians Community Fund, is underway in 2015. The Stewardship Coordinator is planning and implementing six workshops and 6 to 8 community stewardship events on partner properties.

Several workshops have already been held, including a bee nest building workshop in March, a native plant sale in early April, and a workshop on identifying and removing harmful invasive native plants in late April. Other planned stewardship activities will include interpretive hikes, and designing a pollinator or butterfly garden.

The Stewardship Coordinator has also scheduled three naturalization planting projects in Burlington parks over the coming year. The planting will consist of native trees, shrubs and some wildflowers.

Bridgeview Park: A naturalized area of approximately 1,450m² was added to the park on May 24th. The planting area was located near the baseball diamond and it reconnects two natural areas along the Grindstone Creek and extends the adjacent forest habitat into the table lands of the park. Assistance and additional funding toward this planting project was provided by the Girl Guides of Canada.

Bayview Park: Planting of approximately 370m² will take place adjacent to King Road. This project is intended to facilitate meadow restoration for pollinators and other species.

Kerncliff Park: Planting on a slope near the west parking lot of approximately 250m² in area. This project will create a pollinator corridor of native species in the Park.

Invasive species removal and habitat restoration is also scheduled for Conservation Halton owned portions of the Clappison Escarpment Woods in the Fall.

A stewardship display and a series of fact sheets has been developed which includes information about:

- Free On-Site Consultation
- Stewardship Award Program
- Pollinator Gardens
- Riparian Buffers
- Online Ponds

Landowner outreach is taking place at stewardship events and follow-up meetings are being arranged to conduct site visits and discuss restoration and stewardship initiatives on specific landholdings.

Stakeholder Engagement

The goal of stakeholder engagement is to raise awareness of the Ecopark and enhance the community's sense of ownership and pride in these unique lands. In addition to the website and social media, new print and display materials have been created to provide information about the Ecopark system. These include display banners and panels, a brochure, a series of information sheets, an "elevator pitch" card, and a post card, all with the Ecopark logo and branding.

The City of Burlington has devoted significant resources to the promotion of the Ecopark over the past year.

- In February 2014, the Mayor's Inspire Series featured Dr. David Galbraith of the Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) providing an overview of the Ecopark System.
- In March 2014, Councillor Craven hosted a Community Open House to promote the Ecopark, featuring displays and workshops, along with a lecture by Tys Theysmeyer of the RBG on Living Next to Nature.
- In May 2014, the City hosted a grand opening event to unveil the Eileen & John Holland Nature Sanctuary on York Road as part of the Ecopark System.
- In August & September, the Ecopark was nominated in the Public Spaces category as one of the Great Places in Canada, and received some good local press coverage through this initiative.
- The Fall 2014 issue of City Talk featured the cover and a two page spread devoted to a story about the Ecopark and how Burlington citizens could get involved.

Other communication initiatives are proceeding in 2015:

The first of a series of promotional videos, (funded by the City of Burlington's supplementary 2013 donation), will soon be completed. This video will be used to build excitement and recognition within the local community. Subsequent videos will be focused on government engagement and fundraising activities.

Community signage has been designed and purchased to promote the Ecopark on City owned property. Signs will be installed in local parks in the Aldershot area over the coming months.

A new 3D terrain map of the Ecopark has been commissioned to more effectively illustrate the future vision of the Ecopark and its natural, cultural heritage and recreation features. The map will be more visually engaging and accessible to a lay audience while maintaining geographic accuracy. Completion is expected by the summer of 2015.

**Land
Securement**

Land securement for the Ecopark received a major boost in early 2013 with the generous donation of 15 hectares of land by Mr. John Holland. The donated property at 1401 Old York Road has been named the "Eileen and John Holland Nature Sanctuary". A celebration of this donation was held on May 30, 2014 in the form of a sign unveiling and guided hike.

Through the Friends of the Greenbelt funding, a part time Land Securement Coordinator has been retained to conduct outreach and provide land securement information to area landowners. The purpose of this outreach is to build positive relationships with area property owners and help them understand the various options available for conservation and stewardship of their lands.

Content for the Ecopark website has been updated and materials developed which provide additional information about various forms of land securement (life interest, bequest, conservation easement, split receipt, ecogift, etc.). A major mailing to landowners was completed in the winter of 2014 with a landowner breakfast held in February. Ecopark staff have also developed and distributed articles about land protection to encourage landowners to sell or donate their lands, and have reached out to different sources of funding to help with land purchases.

There were three environmentally significant Burlington properties added to the Ecopark over the past year:

- **625 Old York Road** – this 10.7 ha. parcel was purchased by Conservation Halton in September 2014 with assistance from the Bruce Trail Conservancy, the Hamilton Naturalists' Club and Halton Region. The Regional funding came from the Halton Green Fund reserve. This property is adjacent to the Clappison Escarpment Woods Resource Management Area already owned by Conservation Halton.
- **1860 Snake Road** – this 1.9 ha parcel was purchased by the City of Burlington in March 2015. This parcel is also adjacent to Conservation Halton property and is located within the Clappison Escarpment Woods Environmentally Sensitive Area.
- **2272 Kerns Road** – this 1.9 ha parcel was transferred to Conservation Halton from Infrastructure Ontario. The property is located adjacent to the Waterdown Woods Environmental Sensitive Area and City View Park.

In spring 2015, land securement and stewardship information packages were distributed to landowners west of Highway 6 and initial discussions occurred with a few of the landowners. Packages will be sent to groups of landowners east of Highway 6 over the coming months. Although there were two significant prospects for major land acquisition near Highway 6, the landowners involved decided to take a step back at this time.

The Land Securement Coordinator will continue to follow up with interested landowners and conduct site visits throughout 2015.

**Senior
Government
Engagement**

The official Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Ecopark partner agencies was signed in June 2013. A copy of the MOU is attached to Appendix One. The MOU has a term of three years, and can be renewed with agreement by the parties.

The MOU establishes the following:

- Recognition of the Ecopark as a formal entity;
- A system for joint decision making and collaboration;
- A project work plan & joint partner funding for 2013 - June 2016;
- Exploration of special recognition or legislation for the area by the Provincial or Federal government.

The enactment of special legislation will be a critical achievement for this term of the MOU. In order to secure advice about senior government engagement, Redbrick Communications were retained using supplementary funding provided by the City of Burlington.

Redbrick staff suggested that proponents of the Ecopark need to be able to promote the vision in a manner likely to attract broad support in the local community as well as the Ontario Legislature. In addition to promoting the environmental benefits of the Ecopark, the partners should also be promoting its economic return and social benefits (tourism, recreation, enhanced quality of life, mental health, community reputation, and property values).

Redbrick conducted a series of telephone interviews with local community leaders to ask for their ideas on how to build support and momentum for the Ecopark.

The consensus of those interviewed was:

- that the Ecopark is a worthy and exciting project;
- that not enough people know about it;
- that any request for senior government assistance must be fully endorsed and supported by all of the partner agencies; and
- that this request for assistance must be stated clearly and succinctly.

As a result of this advice, the Ecopark Coordinator and Management Committee developed a clear and concise proposal to facilitate Senior Government Engagement. The Engagement Proposal (attached as Appendix One to this report) contains the following information:

1. Background on the history of the Ecopark
2. An summary of the environmental, economic and social benefits provided by the Ecopark

3. A copy of the current Ecopark Partner MOU
4. Illustrated fact sheets about the Ecopark
5. Requests for:
 - Provincial partnership in the Ecopark:
 - becoming a party to the MOU
 - conveyance and ecological stewardship of Crown property
 - collaboration on joint initiatives
 - Legislative recognition and support:
 - special purpose legislation
 - recognition within existing Provincial plans
 - Financial support:
 - capital costs of land securement
 - on-going land stewardship, community engagement and administrative costs
6. Suggested contents of special purpose legislation including:
 - recognition as an area of Provincial significance
 - recognition as a priority for funding under Provincial programs for protection and enhancement of natural and cultural heritage
 - designation of the geographic area covered by the partner owned lands
 - management structure as outlined in the current MOU
 - powers to manage, protect & enhance the area

A draft of the proposal was brought the Ecopark Governing Council in February 2015. Minor amendments were made, and the final version is attached as Appendix One.

It is recommended that Council endorse the Ontario Government Engagement Proposal, as the basis for future discussions with the Province about special purpose legislation to recognize the Ecopark. The document has previously been reviewed by Burlington Legal staff.

Once the Engagement Proposal has been endorsed, it will be used as the basis of discussion with Provincial officials. A Queens Park Day will be scheduled in the Fall of 2015 to highlight the Ecopark and engage politicians and senior staff in discussions around the requested special legislation.

In the meantime, discussions continue to take place between the Ecopark System Coordinator and Provincial government officials. On May 4, 2015 a meeting was held with:

- Ted McMeekin (Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing)
- Eleanor McMahan (Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of

- Natural Resources and Forestry)
- Jim Bradley (Deputy Government House Leader and Chair of Cabinet)
- Staff from Ministries of Natural Resources and Forestry; Environment and Climate Change; Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs; and Municipal Affairs and Housing

Currently the Ecopark System Coordinator is working with Ted McMeekin's office and Eleanor McMahon's office on two initiatives:

- exploring the possibility of the province signing on as a party to the Ecopark MOU
- organizing a site tour of the Ecopark for Ministers.

In addition, the current consolidated Provincial Plans Review has also provided an opportunity to seek Provincial recognition of the Ecopark. On May 14, 2015: a meeting was held to discuss the Provincial Plans Review with:

- David Crombie and Rae Horst (Chair and Member, respectively, of the Advisory Panel for the Coordinated Land Use Plans Review)
- Staff from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing

The joint Halton municipal response in May 2015 included the following statement:

The Province should support and use Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy as model of interagency co-operation that protects open space.

Financial Matters:

Total Financial Impact

In order to support the further development of the Ecopark System, annual financial contributions were approved by the partner agencies. These contributions cover basic costs of the Ecopark System Coordinator and associated activities from July 2013 to June 2016. Contributions are equal among most of the partners, at \$15,400 per year. The exception is that much smaller contributions are being requested from the Bruce Trail Conservancy and the Hamilton Naturalists' Club in recognition of the more limited financial resources of these two organizations.

Funds provided by partner agencies for the Ecopark System are held and managed by the RBG on behalf of the other partners. In addition, the RBG continues to provide office space and administrative support for the Ecopark System Coordinator.

Although work continues on the identification of long term governance model and funding sources for the Ecopark, it is expected that the partners will be requested to consider extending the term of the current MOU and associated administrative funding. Staff will

provide a further report on this issue later in 2015 for consideration through the 2016 budget process.

Other Resource Impacts

In January 2014, Burlington Council approved an additional \$25,000 of funding toward an enhanced communication and engagement effort for the Ecopark. A matching donation was contributed by Burlington Hydro. This additional funding continues to be used toward the following activities:

- Preparation of professional video material tailored toward the community, as well as toward senior levels of government
- Communication consultant advice on strategies and techniques to work toward provincial or federal legislation for the Ecopark
- Supplementary printed communication material, vision mapping and signage to create name recognition and excitement around the Ecopark

City staff continues to provide assistance with Ecopark projects and initiatives as well as represent the City on the Governing Council and Management Committee. James Ridge is Burlington's representative on the Governing Council. Rosalind Minaji is the current Burlington representative and Vice-Chair of the Management Committee. Rob Peachey, Manager of Parks and Open Spaces, is the alternate member and is also Steering Committee representative in the development of the Heritage Management Plans for the Ecopark.

Environmental Matters:

The Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System is one of the most biologically rich areas of Canada, providing habitat to more than 1,500 species of plants and animals, including 40% of Ontario's wild plant species and more than 50 species at risk. It is also the last intact ecological connection between a Lake Ontario coastal wetland and the Niagara Escarpment. The environmental significance of this area has been recognized at the international, national, provincial and local levels.

These significant natural lands are situated in one of Canada's most rapidly growing urban regions. This development has caused the natural areas to become fragmented by roads, rail lines and other activities leading to a disconnected patchwork of smaller protected areas. This situation presents an urgent need to reconnect, restore and protect these valuable lands, and to create a lasting legacy for current and future generations.

Conclusion:

The vision for the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System is that it will be known internationally as a protected, permanent and connected natural lands sanctuary from the Harbour to the Escarpment that promotes ecosystem and human health within Ontario's Greenbelt.

The next year will continue the push for senior government legislation. Council is requested to endorse the Ontario Government Engagement Proposal attached as Appendix One, as the basis for future discussions with the Province about special purpose legislation to recognize and fund the Ecopark.

Work on the Ecopark is proceeding at an encouraging pace. The past 18 months has been a period of consistent effort by the project partners, stakeholders and the public. As a long term vision, the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark will create a permanent, connected, open-space sanctuary at the head of Lake Ontario. It will provide Burlington residents with the means to ensure that regardless of urban pressure, we will draw on the best practices available to protect, enhance and celebrate the special species that exist in this area.

Respectfully submitted,

Rosalind Minaji, Coordinator Development Review

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Appendices:

1. Ontario Government Engagement Proposal

Notifications: (after Council decision)

Name:	Mailing or E-mail Address:

Approved by:

Reviewed by: