



SUBJECT: Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Update

TO: Committee of the Whole

FROM: Capital Works

Report Number: CW-05-19

Wards Affected: all

File Numbers: 501-02-54

Date to Committee: November 4, 2019

Date to Council: November 18, 2019

Recommendation:

Receive and file capital works report CW-05-19 regarding an update on the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System.

Purpose:

A Healthy and Greener City

- Healthy Lifestyles
- Environmental and Energy Leadership

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System (EcoPark System) governance model, to highlight accomplishments since commencement of the project and to inform Council on efforts to update the EcoPark System Strategic Plan.

Background and Discussion:

The EcoPark System is a collaborative initiative to protect, restore and connect more than 3,900 hectares (9,600 acres) of natural lands at the western end of Lake Ontario, in the City of Burlington and City of Hamilton. It consists of more than 1,900 hectares of permanently protected natural lands and open space, surrounded by 2,000 hectares of land in private ownership, considered stewardship outreach lands (refer to Appendix A EcoPark System Vision Map). These lands provide extensive ecosystem services

including recreational opportunities and is considered one of the most biologically rich areas in Canada, being home to more than 1582 species and 57 species at risk.

The EcoPark System Strategic plan approved in 2009 provides the following Vision and Mission:

“Our vision for the Cootes to Escarpment Ecosystem is that it will be known internationally as a protected, permanent and connected natural lands sanctuary from the Harbour to Escarpment that promotes ecosystem and human health within Ontario’s Green belt”

“Our mission will be to collaboratively continue preserving and enhancing the natural lands using a sustainable approach that balances natural ecosystem health with responsible human appreciation and activities to achieve the vision”

Governance Structure

The EcoPark System functions as a unique, voluntary collaboration under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The partner agencies include the City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, Region of Halton, Royal Botanical Gardens, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, the Bruce Trail Conservancy, Hamilton Naturalist Club and McMaster University. The MOU defines the governance framework structure including a Governing Council, a Management Committee and a Secretariat.

The Governing Council is responsible for strategic direction and decision making and is comprised of senior level staff from each agency. The Management Committee is responsible for tactical-level decision making, implementation of the strategic directions, objectives and activities identified by the governing Council, it consists of management-level staff from each agency. The Secretariat deals with the day to day administration and coordination of projects, programs and grant applications for the EcoPark System.

Under the MOU, the partner agencies provide funding support for the Secretariat, and is hosted by the Royal Botanical Gardens.

Accomplishments

The establishment of the EcoPark System has allowed for partnership successes that would not have been possible as individual agencies. The partnerships have resulted in significant progress towards achieving the vision for the EcoPark System. Some key highlights are described below:

- The partnership received almost \$2.2 million in grants from the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Great lakes Guardians Fund, and other funding agencies.
- Land acquisition is a significant activity and over 90 hectares (223 acres) has been secured by partner agencies through donations, purchase or conservation

easements. In 2014, the John Holland Family made a generous donation of 37 acres to the City Burlington in honour of Eileen Holland.

- Numerous stewardship activities have occurred on partner lands and private landowner properties to highlight the importance of natural corridors and promote sustainable land management techniques to landowners. Much of the stewardship work aligns with efforts to mitigating climate change.
- The partners have continuously engaged with officials in the Provincial and federal governments to seek special legislation and or recognition and funding for the EcoPark System. As a result of this activity, the Partnership and Liaison Advisor in the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry sits on the Management Committee as an observer to discuss next steps in obtaining special purpose legislation and recognition for the EcoPark System.
- Management of these lands is key to the success of the EcoPark System. To this end, partners have developed comprehensive joint Heritage Land Management Plans for the six core heritage land areas. Heritage Land Management plans provide a consistent framework for the future planning, implementation and management under ownership of the partners. The Lower Grindstone Creek Heritage Management Plan is the last plan to be prepared and is scheduled to be complete in early 2020.
- Public awareness activities in the form of community stewardship workshops and volunteer restoration events remain central to the EcoPark System successes. This work has included events such as invasive species removals, planting of native species and BioBlitz events to map plants and wildlife in the EcoPark System.

Strategy/process

Work is currently underway to update the 2009 EcoPark System Strategic Plan. This update will refresh the Vision & Mission and identify key objectives and strategic directions anticipated over the next decade to 2030. Work on the new 2021-2030 Strategic Plan is expected to conclude in 2020 and will be presented to municipal councils and partner Boards upon completion for approval in principle. Upon completion of the Strategic Plan, partner agencies will commence work on the third Memorandum of Understanding, for the period of 2021-2025.

Options considered

Financial Matters:

In order to support the continued development of the EcoPark System, an annual financial contribution was approved through Report PB -80-15 Cootes to Escarpment

EcoPark System-Extension of Partner MOU. The City's contribution in 2019 is \$16,669 and will be \$17,003 in 2020. The term of the current Memorandum of Understanding ends in 2020.

Total Financial Impact

The total financial impact over the term of the existing MOU is \$81,745.

Source of Funding

The source of funding for the existing MOU is the Tax Rate Stabilization Fund.

Other Resource Impacts

In addition to the financial contribution, staff provide services in kind participating on the Governance Committee, the Management Committee and project teams for the development on the Heritage Lands Management Plans.

Climate Implications

The EcoPark System's mission to collaboratively continue preserving and enhancing the natural lands using a sustainable approach that balances natural ecosystem health with responsible human appreciation is in line with climate action goals by taking an Ecosystems Services approach to the parks management and enhancement.

Partners will continue to protect these lands as functioning ecosystems by:

- Securing additional undeveloped greenspace
- Reinforcing ecological corridors
- Providing and promoting resilience to climate change
- Developing sustainable recreation services, education, stewardship within partners lands and surrounding land owners

The EcoPark System is an example to others of a protected, permanent and connected natural land sanctuary that promotes ecosystem and human health as a major contributor to positive climate change and mitigation.

Connections:

The EcoPark System strategic directions relate directly to the City's Trail Strategy, Parks Master Plan and anticipated mitigating actions in the Climate Action Plan.

Public Engagement Matters:

Considerable Public engagement has occurred through the development of the Heritage Management plans including;

- Public Information meetings
- Stakeholder Advisory committee meetings
- Agency Steering Committee
- Indigenous Engagement
- and advertisements through agency websites, local papers and social media.

In addition to these opportunities the Stewardship coordinator undertakes community outreach on stewardship programs and technical information.

Update to the EcoPark System web page in 2020.

Conclusion:

The Ecopark System is a unique collaborative partnership among a diverse group of participating agencies including the City of Burlington. The many accomplishments to date work towards achieving the vision to be known internationally as a protected, permanent and connected natural lands sanctuary from Hamilton Harbour to the Escarpment. The updating of the strategic plan will ensure the vision, mission and key objects of the EcoPark System remain focused and achievable.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Peachey

Manager Parks & Open Space- Capital Works Department

905-335-7600 ext. 7722

Appendices:

- A. EcoPark System Vision Map

Notifications:

Tomasz Wiercioch

twiercioch@rbg.ca

Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and/or approved by Department Director, Director of Finance and Director of Legal. Final approval is by the City Manager.