



SUBJECT: Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan

TO: Environment, Infrastructure & Community Services Cttee.

FROM: Engineering Services Department

Report Number: ES-09-21

Wards Affected: all

File Numbers: 502-02-54

Date to Committee: June 10, 2021

Date to Council: June 22, 2021

Recommendation:

Endorse the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan (2021-2030) attached as Appendix A to engineering services department report ES-09-21; and

Direct the Director of Engineering Services to collaborate with partner agencies to implement the directions and actions of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan (2021-2030).

PURPOSE:

Vision to Focus Alignment:

- Support sustainable infrastructure and a resilient environment
 - Building more citizen engagement, community health and culture
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Background and Discussion:

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System (EcoPark) is a collaborative initiative among government and not for profit agencies, formed to protect, restore and connect more than 3,900 hectares of natural lands at the end of Lake Ontario between Cootes Paradise Marsh, Hamilton Harbour and the Niagara Escarpment. Collectively, the partner agencies own close to 2,200 hectares of open space and nature sanctuaries, with the balance of the lands in private ownership.

In 2006 the Natural Heritage Committee of the Bay Area Restoration Council brought forward the idea of a collaborative partnership for the establishment of an EcoPark. As a result of research and consultation the first Strategic plan, the “Cootes to Escarpment Park System: Conservation Land Management Strategy” was finalized. In 2009 Council endorsed the Strategic Plan for the EcoPark, outlining the vision, strategic goals, objectives and actions required to implement the plan. In 2013 the City of Burlington and participating partners entered into a formal partnership through a 3 year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which was amended in 2016 for an additional 5 year extension (2016-2021). Since the adoption of the 2009 Strategic Plan, significant work has been undertaken and reported to Council at key milestones.

Strategy/process

In February 2019, the EcoPark partners commenced a process to review and update the Vision, strategic goals and objectives of the 2009 Strategic Plan. This work included workshops and consultation with members of the partner agencies, including the City of Burlington, and stakeholders involved in citizen-led projects for ecological restoration in the EcoPark. This work has resulted in an updated Strategic Plan for 2021 - 2030 which sets priorities and objectives for the EcoPark partner agencies to achieve by 2030 a framework for tracking and reporting on work to achieve the objectives. Please refer to Appendix A – Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan 2021 -2030 to view the strategic plan. The EcoPark Governing Council approved the Strategic Plan on April 27, 2021 for distribution and adoption by the partner Boards and Councils.

Strategic Plan Framework

The Strategic Plan consists of the following major sections:

Vision & Mission Statements

Our Vision for the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is that it becomes a permanently protected natural lands sanctuary linking Cootes Paradise Marshlands with Hamilton Harbour and the Niagara Escarpment.

Our Mission as partners is to collaborate to preserve and enhance the natural lands we own and steward by using sustainable approaches to protect biodiversity, highlight ecosystem services, and enable responsible human connection to nature.

Objectives

The Strategic Plan frame work includes 5 key objectives for natural lands management including;

- Natural Heritage – to protect, restore and enhance the ecological system by ensuring the health and diversity of the species, habitats and natural processes

- Recreation – to provide opportunities for appropriate passive recreation that supports active living while maintaining the biological and physical integrity of the lands
- Cultural Heritage – to identify, protect and preserve cultural heritage features for their valuable reflection on the historic use and occupancy of the area
- Interpretation - To provide educational opportunities that promote knowledge, innovation and discovery that furthers understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural values, environmental sensitivity and significance, and the need for conservation.
- Management - To promote responsible stewardship of the lands and involve the community in park planning and management.

Strategic Priority Areas

The Strategic Plan provides five strategic priorities to advance the implementation in a coordinated manner for the years 2021 to 2030. Each strategic priority is further articulated with directions and actions as follows:

1. Healthy Ecosystems- Partner agencies aim to effectively manage this connected and biodiverse landscape through ecological restoration, rehabilitation, protection of additional lands and naturalization projects that balance nature's needs with human use.
2. Human Experience - By supporting opportunities for people to understand, engage and celebrate the landscape, EcoPark System partners will ensure its relevance and importance for present and future Burlington and Hamilton residents.
3. Innovation and Discovery - EcoPark System partners and stakeholders will research new approaches in protecting urban natural spaces, supporting human wellbeing through nature and opportunities for citizen science
4. Thriving Partnerships - Ensuring thriving partnerships means maintaining existing relationships while pursuing new collaborative opportunities and support.
5. Financial Sustainability - The secretariat and partner agencies will explore diverse sources for multi-year and self-sustainable funding for existing and future essential EcoPark System work.

These priorities guide our collective work and provide a framework for annually tracking and reporting outcomes in the EcoPark report card. The strategic priorities also assist agencies to plan resources and budgeting to implement the plan.

Financial Matters:

Currently the City of Burlington contributes to the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System through a formal agreement with partner agencies through a Memorandum of

Understanding that comes to term in 2021. Staff will be bringing forward a separate report in 2021 with an updated Memorandum of Understanding for Council approval.

City of Burlington financial commitments (other than staff time) for the implementation of the Strategic Plan will be subject to future Council approvals through the budget process.

Climate Implications

The EcoPark System is a collaborative initiative to protect, restore and connect more than 3,900 hectares of natural lands at the western end of Lake Ontario and serves as an excellent example of extensive ecosystem services and recreational opportunities envisioned by partner agencies.

Partner Agencies have commenced a project to evaluate ecosystem services of the EcoPark. The goal of the study is to document and better understand the current value to society of ecosystem services provided by partner-owned lands within the EcoPark, as expressed as dollars per year of value provided. It is desired that this will foster understanding, support, and appreciation amongst the public, and aid the partner agencies in developing their capacity to deal with stressors such as future urban growth and the effects of climate change.

Engagement Matters:

- November 11, 2020 to December 19, 2020. - [The 2021-2030 Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan](#) was posted on the EcoPark System website for review and comment from
- November 24- Friends of the EcoPark System workshop
The event highlighted the EcoPark System successes, provided information about future directions (2021-2030 Strategic Plan), and included discussion on ways individuals and groups can support the Strategic Plan's Priority Actions
- February 5 - Focus group meeting with Burlington Economic Development Corporation & Hamilton Chamber of Commerce. Feedback on ways the private sector sees itself in the strategic priorities was the topic of discussion.

Conclusion:

By endorsing the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan 2021 -2030, Council is committing to a shared vision for a permanently protected natural lands sanctuary and to collaborate to preserve and enhance the natural lands we own and steward by using sustainable approaches to protect biodiversity, highlight ecosystem services, and enable responsible human connection to nature.

It is recommended that Council endorse the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan 2021 -2030 and direct staff to collaborate with partner agencies to implement the directions and actions of the Strategic Plan.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Peachey

Manager Park Design and Construction

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Appendices: (if none delete section)

- A. Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan 2021 -2030

Notifications: (if none delete section)

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Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and/or approved by Department Director, the Chief Financial Officer and the Executive Director of Legal Services & Corporation Counsel.