



SUBJECT: Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Pilot Ecological Corridor Program update

TO: Community Planning, Regulation & Mobility Cttee.

FROM: Engineering Services Department

Report Number: ES-06-23

Wards Affected: all

File Numbers: 502-02-54

Date to Committee: March 28, 2023

Date to Council: April 18, 2023

Recommendation:

Receive and file engineering services department report ES-06-23, Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Pilot Ecological Corridor Program update; and

Authorize the Executive Director of Environment, Infrastructure & Community Services to execute an agreement with Royal Botanical Gardens to recover funds for City projects under the Parks Canada EcoPark System Pilot Ecological Corridor Program, to the satisfaction of the Executive Director of Legal Services and Corporation Counsel.

PURPOSE:

Vision to Focus Alignment:

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

Background and Discussion:

The Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System (EcoPark System) is a voluntary alliance of nine government and not-for-profit agencies collaborating to protect, connect and enhance ecologically significant lands between the Niagara Escarpment and Cootes Paradise Marsh. These lands, located at the western end of Lake Ontario in Hamilton and Burlington are recognized for their biodiversity, cultural significance, and

recreational value. This is a complex, biologically diverse, while fragmented landscape that is home to the only remaining terrestrial ecological corridor between the Niagara Escarpment and Lake Ontario wetlands at Cootes Paradise Marsh.

EcoPark System partners include the Bruce Trail Conservancy, Conservation Halton, Halton Region, City of Hamilton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, Hamilton Naturalists' Club, City of Burlington, McMaster University, and Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG). While managing their lands individually, the partners have been collaborating on this initiative since 2013, currently operating under the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System 2022-2026 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The MOU defines the EcoPark System's governance structure, which consists of Governing Council for strategic decisions, Management Committee for tactical level decisions and a Secretariat to carry out the day-to-day operations. The MOU also stipulates annual payments required from each of the partners to support the Secretariat, which is managed by RBG as the implementing partner. The combined annual payments support one full-time staff member and operating expenses, with other initiatives supported by various grants as available.

The Cootes to Escarpment 2021-2030 Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan) outlines goals and objectives to achieve the long-term vision for the EcoPark System, which is to create a permanently protected natural lands sanctuary within this biologically diverse landscape.

Parks Canada National Program for Ecological Corridors

In April 2022, the federal government announced a National Program for Ecological Corridors to be led by Parks Canada. The program will support the conservation, maintenance, and restoration of ecological corridors which play an important role in the natural environment by

- Preserving biodiversity,
- Addressing impacts of climate change,
- Protecting and restoring ecosystems, and
- Contributing to the recovery of species at risk.

Parks Canada will seek to collaborate with other levels of government, partners, experts, and stakeholders to develop criteria and map areas where these corridors will have the greatest positive effects on biodiversity conservation in key areas across Canada. This will include working with Indigenous partners to ensure that the program is informed by Indigenous knowledge and contributes to reconciliation through support for Indigenous-led stewardship.

With an investment of \$60.6 million over five years, supported by the historic \$2.3 billion investment in Canada's natural legacy announced in Budget 2021, the program will enable organizations to develop strong ecological connections between protected and conserved areas to benefit the environment and all Canadians.

Parks Canada Ecological Corridors Pilot Program

In September 2022, Parks Canada advised that one of the first initiatives to be funded by the Parks Canada National Program for Ecological Corridors is a series of ecological corridor pilot programs, to support the conservation of ecological corridors with targeted initiatives across Canada. These pilots are to begin in early 2023 and continue for 12 to 16 months with a priority to complete 'in the ground' projects, demonstrating early success with measurable outcomes. Parks Canada will use key learnings from the pilots to shape the criteria for the future full program that is planned to follow at a future date.

Parks Canada identified the EcoPark System as a potential candidate for the pilot program. It was evident that the goals of the Parks Canada National Program for Ecological Corridors align directly with the vision for the EcoPark System. An EcoPark System pilot (Pilot) would help to advance the goals of the Strategic Plan and provide immediate funding for key initiatives on partner-owned lands.

EcoPark System Pilot Proposal

Following consultation with EcoPark System partners through Management Committee, a proposal for a Pilot was developed and submitted to Parks Canada. The proposal captures projects and initiatives proposed by each of the partners, categorized into five components:

- 1) **Exploring Landowner Engagement and Participation** through outreach to private landowners and others, coordinating, planning, and organizing habitat enhancement projects and celebrating achievements,
- 2) **Assessing and Taking Advantage of Land Securement Opportunities** that could bring suitable land that has corridor functionality under the protection of partner agencies through purchase, donation, or other means,
- 3) **Enabling Habitat Restoration** on EcoPark System partner properties that have functions within corridors, such as invasive species management, trail decommissioning, plantings of native species, wildlife directional fencing and barrier mitigation, and signage supporting responsible recreational use, and
- 4) **Engaging and Building Relationships with the Indigenous Community** with a focus on urban natural lands through, for example, inviting First Nations participation in restoration projects.

- 5) Program management and **evaluation against the goal of improving corridors** by identifying objective criteria that indicate whether a habitat and ecological corridor are improving and strengthening.

A draft budget for the Pilot was developed, in the amount of \$3.5 million that includes overall support for the EcoPark System and improvements on partner-owned lands, which will benefit all partners of the alliance. The budget includes a breakdown of costs for proposed initiatives to support each of the component areas including:

- Hiring dedicated staff for the duration of the Pilot including a Project Manager and Indigenous Engagement Coordinator,
- Potential land acquisition of several properties known to be available for purchase,
- Hiring consulting expertise to support planning for future land purchase opportunities, to identify priority ecological corridors and other initiatives,
- 'In the ground' works including tree planting, habitat restoration and protection, and
- Staff support for project management, outreach, engagement, and other initiatives.

City of Burlington Pilot Project

As a component of the \$3.5 million budget, a project at City View Park has been approved within the Pilot. The project will include enhancement of a 7-hectare area within the park at the top of the Escarpment, that is designated as an ecological restoration zone. The initial restoration effort completed in 2012 will benefit from improvements under the Pilot toward the long-term goal, which is to create a healthy woodland forest. This is a significant restoration effort that will expand the existing ecological corridor along the Escarpment.

The scope of the proposed project is to conduct monitoring to evaluate the success of the restoration to date and to prepare recommendations for enhancements that further advance the creation of the expanded ecological corridor. This could include additional tree planting, tree protection, maintenance, and other improvements to support the initial restoration effort. This work will support the Vision to Focus priority goal to increase the tree canopy city wide. The estimated budget for this work is approximately \$30,000 with the opportunity to expand the scope to additional phases, subject to future funding.

Other initiatives at City properties within the EcoPark System that could be included in the Pilot are improvements at the Eileen and John Holland Nature Sanctuary, including removal of invasive species and tree planting. This work is currently indicated for consideration if funds become available, should other proposed projects not proceed.

Funding Agreement

Following submissions of further detailed information, Parks Canada approved the budget requested for the proposed initiatives within the five component areas. The announcement was made publicly on January 26, 2023, in Toronto by the Minister of Environment and Climate Change. RBG, as the implementing partner has been assigned to manage the funds. A contribution agreement between RBG and Parks Canada was executed in January 2023.

Sub-agreements between RBG and each of the EcoPark System partner agencies will be prepared as a mechanism to reimburse funds to the partner agencies for selected projects on their lands. The City will work with RBG to complete the terms of the agreement between the City and RBG. Subject to final review of the terms by the City's Legal Department, the agreement will be executed to allow the funding to be directed to City of Burlington for initiatives under the Pilot, which to date include the City View Park project in the amount of approximately \$30,000.

Financial Matters:

Total Financial Impact

The project costs for any initiatives under the Pilot will be funded by Parks Canada as outlined in the contribution agreement. Any costs for City of Burlington projects will be reimbursed to the City from RBG through the partner sub-agreement. Staff time to manage the project will be required and is provided as an in-kind contribution to the overall initiative.

Source of Funding

Not applicable.

Other Resource Impacts

Staff will continue to support the EcoPark System with representation on Governing Council, Management Committee and sub-committees as required. Additional staff time will be required to manage the City View Park project and any other initiatives on City lands throughout the duration of the Pilot.

Climate Implications

The EcoPark System as it exists today, includes nearly 2,200 hectares of protected natural lands and open space, within the growing urban areas of Burlington and

Hamilton. These natural lands contribute to mitigating the risks of climate change in many ways including:

- Helping to reduce flood risk by allowing water to infiltrate into soils to reduce runoff,
- Increasing biodiversity through protection and habitat improvements,
- Improving air quality through filtering of pollutants, and
- Regulating temperature by cooling from tree cover.

The continued commitment by the City of Burlington to the EcoPark System is an important step in meeting the City's goals for climate action locally.

Engagement Matters:

The Pilot proposal for the EcoPark System was developed collaboratively among the partner agencies, in consultation with Parks Canada. A communications plan has been prepared for the Pilot including internal communications and broader outreach/engagement with the community to help to advance the projects identified under the Pilot, while raising awareness of the EcoPark System. Key points of communication include:

- Updates to Governing Council,
 - Check-ins with Parks Canada,
 - Stakeholder information sessions,
 - Media releases, and
 - Reporting.
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Conclusion:

The Pilot is a significant funding opportunity that will help advance the goals and objectives of the EcoPark System as outlined in the Strategic Plan. The partner sub-agreement will allow for funds to be directed from the Pilot through RBG to the City for projects on City owned lands within the EcoPark System. The success of the Pilot will position the EcoPark System as a strong candidate for the future multi-year program, which would help to secure longer term external funding for the EcoPark System.

Respectfully submitted,

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Notifications:

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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.