



Report

TO: Conservation Advisory Board

FROM: Lisa Burnside, Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)

PREPARED BY: Gord Costie, Director of Conservation Area Services

DATE: February 8, 2018

RE: 2018 Shuttle Bus Service - Spencer Gorge Conservation Area

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Conservation Advisory Board recommends to the Board of Directors:

THAT the shuttle bus service for the Spencer Gorge Conservation Area be continued in 2018; and

THAT the shuttle bus service operate on weekends and public holidays beginning Saturday May 12 and running until Sunday October 28, 2018 weather pending; and further

THAT the shuttle bus service base be relocated to Christie Lake Conservation Area.

BACKGROUND

The 63.1 hectare (156 acre) Spencer Gorge/Webster Falls Conservation Area was largely acquired by the Hamilton Conservation Authority (HCA) in the 1960's and in 2000, the lands associated with Webster Park, were acquired by the HCA from the Town of Dundas. With this acquisition, the Spencer Gorge Conservation Area was realized.

The Spencer Gorge Conservation Area has traditionally been a very popular conservation area for hiking, nature interpretation and picnics given its proximity to the greater Hamilton/Burlington area and other nearby communities. Over the past number

of years, attendance has increased at the conservation area with people from the greater Toronto Area, Kitchener/Waterloo and the Niagara Region areas visiting the conservation area to view the falls, experience the views from the Dundas Peak and experience the natural beauty of the Spencer Gorge. The estimated attendance in both 2015 and 2016 was in excess of 100,000 and these two years enjoyed spectacular weather. In 2017 attendance was estimated at 95,000 visitors based on paid attendance, wrist bands, pay display parking, and HCA membership sales. It is anticipated that the popularity of this iconic area and high visitation as demonstrated from past years will continue with the growing population in the greater Toronto and Hamilton Area and promotion through social media with visitors posting selfies and photos showcasing the natural beauty of the waterfalls and escarpment vistas.

In February 2016, the Board of Directors approved a pilot Shuttle Bus Service as a direct response to decrease street parking, reduce traffic congestion and improve safety. The shuttle would operate from a private parking lot east of the conservation area with a local Greensville organization (Think Greensville) as the shuttle operator. The pilot operation began in 2017 once assurances were in place for scheduled municipal bylaw enforcement on weekends/holidays within the community.

The Shuttle Bus Service operated from May 13 to October 29, 2017, on weekends and public holidays removing over 16,000 vehicles from the area roads and safely transporting close to 48,000 visitors to the Spencer Gorge Conservation Area attractions – Webster Falls, Tew Falls, and the Dundas Peak.

STAFF COMMENT

Through the operation and completion of this year's pilot shuttle bus operations, staff have had an opportunity to experience all aspects of the service and evaluate what worked appropriately as well as gain perspectives on components that needed to be revisited.

Despite some initial community concern, the shuttle bus service proved to be the most significant and effective operational change in the past five years. HCA and City of Hamilton representatives worked tirelessly in support of this initiative involving Bylaw Enforcement, Hamilton Police Service, and Hamilton Emergency Service, communicating constantly including updating during regular scheduled meetings. The visual and physical improvement to the community as a whole, was the overwhelming sentiment noted. HCA received positive feedback from residents thanking them for returning the area back to a more peaceful and livable place on weekends with shuttle operations and HCA parking lots closed.

One significant aspect of the shuttle service identified as needing refinement involves its base location. With the success of the pilot shuttle operations demonstrating that visitors will park offsite and shuttle to the area and thereby, decrease street parking, reduce traffic congestion and improve safety, it was important that the shuttle be based in an optimal location.

2017 Pilot Private Parking Lot – Key Issues

- Wayfinding to private parking lot
- No turning lanes both east and west bound on Hwy 5
- Site lines identifying parking areas
- Short single lane entry to gatehouse
- Shared parking area with private operator customers
- Small parking lot with no overflow or expansion area
- Lack of washrooms and picnic areas
- Neighbourhood disruption to Mazza Road residents
- Bylaw zoning noncompliance

2018 Christie Lake – Key Attributes

- Superior wayfinding with Christie Lake recognition and current signage
- Turning lanes both east and west bound on Hwy 5
- Dual entry lane of 250 meters to gatehouse
- Dual gatehouse entry terminals
- Dual POS systems, electronic and encrypted transactions
- Largest parking areas – designed gravel and overflow area
- Conservation Area experience with picnic areas, washrooms, waterfront, rentals

Day use admission rates at major HCA Conservation Areas have been harmonized as per the approved 2018 Fee Schedule by the Board of Directors at the December 2017 meeting. The 2018 day entrance to Christie Lake is now equal to fees used at Spencer Gorge for the past two seasons. This harmonized fee strategy in 2018 will allow for uniform transactions at the gate entry while promoting combined visitation to both areas.

Impact on Christie Lake – Special Events

Shuttle Bus operations will potentially impact conservation area operations during peak season use and/or with Special Events such as the Christie Antique and Vintage Show and third party bookings. In response, staff are reviewing a number of options in order to minimize service disruptions to both the shuttle operation and these events as much as possible. One option includes having a dedicated Shuttle Bus exit/entry system to mitigate traffic issues using the Middletown Road gateway when required. A communication plan will also be key to advise visitors that Christie Lake will be extremely busy during peak event times.

Impact of City of Hamilton Bylaw Enforcement

A successful shuttle operation will require ongoing Bylaw Enforcement of No Parking/Stopping within the Greenville vicinity to deter all unauthorized parking. Continued Bylaw Enforcement to shut down unauthorized "pop up" parking lots is also noted as critical to keeping traffic out and away from the hamlet area and eliminate the undue flow of vehicles those lots create.

STRATEGIC PLAN LINKAGE

The initiative refers directly to the HCA Strategic Plan 2014-2018:

- **Strategic Goal #3 – Conservation Area Experience**
 - Strategic Objective – maintain and enhance the financial sustainability of our conservation areas
 - Strategic Objective – develop and explore new revenue generating opportunities.
 - Strategic Objective - Maintain and enhance conservation area infrastructure and natural heritage features within the context of approved master plans.
 - Strategic Objective - Focus marketing activities to attract visitors to conservation areas.

AGENCY COMMENTS

City of Hamilton staff have been formally advised of the HCA proposal to use Christie Lake Conservation Area as the 2018 Shuttle Bus base and have confirmed zoning bylaw compliance.

LEGAL/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

With the confirmation that there is no zoning issue with this location, there is no legal barrier to moving forward with the recommendations as stated.

From a financial perspective, operating a shuttle system out of Christie Lake compared to utilizing the parking lots at Webster and Tew comes with a cost exceeding \$100,000. However, given that the visitor demand has exceeded the capacity of those lots a shuttle operation is needed and the current recommendation is the most cost effective.

CONCLUSION

Without the actual experience of running a shuttle operation, HCA did not want to risk upsetting regular operations at our largest day use park and hence excluded Christie Lake Conservation Area as a possible site for shuttle parking.

Now that staff have the understanding of how it can work and what stressors there will be on the location, staff are prepared to recommend Christie Lake as the shuttle base for 2018. Christie Lake is an ideal conservation area setting as the start and finish point for visitors. The access from the highway, with its existing turning lanes, provide a safer entry and exit. This area has the largest and most expansive parking opportunities in the HCA Conservation Areas that can accommodate and have been designed for large scale use.