



CITY OF HAMILTON
PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
Planning Division

TO:	Chair and Members Planning Committee
COMMITTEE DATE:	July 6, 2021
SUBJECT/REPORT NO:	Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System - Strategic Plan and Memorandum of Understanding (PED21120) (Wards 1, 13 and 15)
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	Wards 1, 13 and 15
PREPARED BY:	Christine Newbold (905) 546-2424 Ext. 1279 Jennifer Roth (905) 546-2424 Ext. 2058
SUBMITTED BY: SIGNATURE:	Steve Robichaud Director, Planning and Chief Planner Planning and Economic Development Department

RECOMMENDATION

- (a) That the City of Hamilton endorse the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan (2021-2030), attached as Appendix "A" to Report PED21120;
- (b) That the City of Hamilton reaffirm its commitment for the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System by approving the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), attached as Appendix "B" to Report PED21120, for a five year period from 2022 to 2026;
- (c) That the City Manager be authorized and directed to consent to a one time extension of the 2016-2021 Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Memorandum of Understanding, for the period between June 20, 2021 to the effective date of the draft "Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System 2022-2026 Memorandum of Understanding", attached as Appendix "B" to Report PED21120, to continue the administrative functions and operational needs of the EcoPark System.

- (d) That the City of Hamilton continue to support the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System operating budget, shown in Table 1 of the Memorandum of Understanding, attached as Appendix “B” to Report PED21120, through annual contributions starting with \$15,937 in 2022, with 2% inflation for a five year period beginning in 2022 from the current Planning Division Budget;
- (e) That the City Manager be authorized and directed to sign the MOU on behalf of the City of Hamilton; and,
- (f) That Planning Division staff be authorized to continue to provide in-kind resources for the implementation of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan and MOU.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Initiated in 2007, the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System (the EcoPark) is a voluntary collaboration of nine partner agencies (City of Hamilton, Halton Region, City of Burlington, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, Bruce Trail Conservancy, Hamilton Naturalist Club, McMaster University and Royal Botanical Gardens). The partner agencies manage and protect nearly 2,000 ha of open space and natural lands between Cootes Paradise Marsh, Hamilton Harbour and the Niagara Escarpment. These areas are recognized for their significant biodiversity and long cultural history. Approximately half of the lands in the EcoPark are within the City of Hamilton boundary.

The partner agencies work collaboratively to implement the vision of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. The vision for the EcoPark is *“that [the EcoPark System] 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 Greenbelt”*. The participating agencies own and manage their lands individually and collaborate on areas of mutual interest.

The City of Hamilton owns lands within the geographic boundaries of the EcoPark and previously assisted with the completion of the first Strategic Plan (The Cootes to Escarpment Park System Conservation and Management Strategy, Phase II Report, 2009) and has signed 2 previous Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) in 2013 (Report PED08009b / PW12082) and 2016 (Report PW15082a) and provided funding for the activities under the EcoPark Secretariat. The EcoPark Secretariat in collaboration with Partner agency Staff, including City of Hamilton Staff, have prepared the updated Strategic Plan and the draft 2022-2026 Memorandum of Understanding.

The updated Strategic Plan attached as Appendix “A” to Report PED21120, builds on the established vision from the 2009 Strategic Plan and establishes goals and objectives to be achieved by 2030.

The Memorandum of Understanding (2016-2021) (MOU) expires on June 20, 2021 and was approved by EcoPark Governing Council to be extended to December 2021 to align with partner fiscal years. Attached as Appendix “B” to Report PED21120, the MOU recommits the City of Hamilton to the collaborative decision-making framework of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Governing Council and Management Committee and commits the City to providing financial support to the EcoPark Secretariat for the period of 2022-2026. The MOU commits the City to provide total funding of \$82,936 over five years. Approval to extend the 2016-2021 MOU and endorsement of the 2022-2026 MOU secures the City of Hamilton’s commitment as a partner to the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System initiative.

Alternatives for Consideration – See Page 9

FINANCIAL – STAFFING – LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Financial: Annual financial commitment pursuant to the 2022-2026 MOU is \$15,937 starting in 2022, with 2% inflation added each year until 2026 for a total amount of \$82,936. Annual contributions have already been incorporated into the current Planning Division budget and inflationary adjustment will be required for the 2025 and 2026 budget.

Staffing: Staff from the Planning and Economic Development Department (Planning Division) will continue to participate as members of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Management Committee, with Planning and Economic Development as the Corporate Lead. Public Works Department (Environmental Services Division) staff will continue to participate on the Stewardship Subcommittee of the Management Committee.

Legal: Staff from Legal Services reviewed and provided feedback on the 2022-2026 MOU.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Initiated in 2007, the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is a voluntary collaboration of the following nine partner agencies:

- City of Hamilton
- Halton Region

- City of Burlington
- Conservation Halton
- Hamilton Conservation Authority
- Bruce Trail Conservancy
- Hamilton Naturalist Club
- McMaster University; and,
- Royal Botanical Garden.

The partner agencies work together to implement the vision established in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Strategic Plan.

The vision for the EcoPark is *“that [the EcoPark System] 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 Greenbelt.”*

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Conservation and Management Strategy, Phase II Report (2009)

The Cootes to Escarpment Park System Conservation and Management Strategy, Phase II Report, 2009 is the Strategic Plan for the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. It was originally prepared in 2009 and approved in principle by the Councils and Boards of the participating agencies in 2010 as discussed in Report PED08009(a).

The 2009 Strategic Plan included a recommendation to review and update the plan in 2020. The review and revisions to the Strategic plan are now complete and the Strategic Plan was approved by the EcoPark Governing Council on April 27, 2021.

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark Memorandums of Understanding

The City of Hamilton has signed two MOU's: 2013 (Report PED08009b / PW12082) and 2016 (Report PW15082a). The current MOU was signed for the period of 2016-2021. The MOU establishes a framework for joint decision-making among the Partners on matters concerning the EcoPark System. The MOUs established a Governing Council to provide strategic leadership in implementing the EcoPark System and a Management Committee to provide the tactical leadership on implementing the initiatives and the strategic directions of the Governing Council as well as providing operational guidance to the EcoPark Secretariat.

The 2022 – 2026 MOU attached in Appendix “B” to Report PED21120 was approved by the EcoPark Governing Council on April 27, 2021 and it is anticipated that each of the partner agencies will execute the MOU.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND LEGISLATED REQUIREMENTS

The policy framework of the Provincial Policy Statement, Greenbelt Plan, Places to Growth, Parkway Belt West Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Urban Hamilton Official Plan and Rural Hamilton Official Plan provide land use policy direction on the natural lands within the EcoPark System.

The Strategic Plan contains recommendations for land management that affected landowners can voluntarily implement and is not a land use plan or a legally binding document. It is anticipated that there will be no conflict with any existing policies, plans, or legislation currently in effect in the EcoPark lands.

The 2022 – 2026 MOU is a legally binding document that re-establishes the partner agencies commitment to the established vision of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System. It is anticipated that by endorsing the 2022 – 2026 MOU, City of Hamilton can continue its established commitment to the vision of EcoPark system and it will support the Natural Heritage policy goals established in the Official Plan. Legal Services have reviewed the MOU and have no issues or concerns with the MOU document.

On March 27, 2019, City of Hamilton Council declared a Climate Change Emergency. The endorsement of the Strategic Plan and the 2022 – 2026 MOU supports the protection and conservation of Natural Heritage lands, which aid the City of Hamilton in meeting its Climate goals.

RELEVANT CONSULTATION

Strategic Plan

The draft 2021 Strategic Plan and draft 2022-2026 MOU were circulated to City of Hamilton staff for review. The Divisions/Sections that provided comment include:

- Recreation Planning, Healthy and Safe Communities Department;
- Landscape Architectural Services, Public Works Department;
- Hamilton Water, Public Works Department;
- Transportation Planning, Planning and Economic Development Department;
- Development Planning, Heritage and Design, Planning Division, Planning and Economic Development Department;
- Policy Planning, Planning Division, Planning and Economic Development Department; and,
- Legal and Risk Management Services, Corporate Services Department

Staff review confirmed the information, goals and directions contained within the Strategic Plan were aligned with City of Hamilton policies, actions and initiatives. Following the endorsement of the draft 2021 Strategic Plan and the associated Consultation Report (attached as Appendix C to Report PED 21120) at Governing Council in October 2020, public and stakeholder consultation occurred in Q4 2020 and Q1 2021. Community Consultation initiatives were coordinated by the EcoPark Secretariat and included website engagement, meetings with individual partner agency staff, private landowners and Hamilton Chamber of Commerce and Burlington Economic Development Corporation.

The engagement did not result in changes to the Strategic Plan but provided substantial feedback on emerging project priorities including stewardship, trail management, communication, engaging new partners and research. Additional information related to the consultation and the emerging project priorities can be found in the Consultation Report in Appendix “C” to Report PED21120.

ANALYSIS AND RATIONALE FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic Plan

The City of Hamilton is one of nine partners as part of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System initiative and owns lands within the geographic boundaries of the EcoPark. The City of Hamilton has been a partner since the inception of the EcoPark in 2007 and has previously assisted with the completion of the first Strategic Plan

The 2021 Strategic Plan is not a land use plan or a legally binding document. Instead, the 2021 Strategic Plan is an update to the goals and objectives established in the 2009 Strategic Plan. The 2021 Strategic Plan sets priorities and objectives for the EcoPark to achieve by 2030 and a framework for tracking and reporting back on each of these objectives.

The Strategic Plan is centred around five objectives:

1. **Natural Heritage**
To protect, restore and enhance the ecological system by ensuring the health and diversity of species, habitats and natural processes.
2. **Recreation**
To provide opportunities for appropriate passive recreation that support active living while maintaining the biological and physical integrity of the lands.

3. **Cultural Heritage**
To identify, protect and preserve cultural heritage features for their valuable reflection of the historical use and occupancy of the area.
4. **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.
5. **Management**
To promote responsible stewardship of the lands and involve the community in park planning and management.

The Strategic Plan expresses five Strategic Priority Areas to advance from 2021- 2030: Healthy Ecosystems; Human experience; Innovation and Discovery; Thriving Partnerships; and, Financial Sustainability.

The Strategic Priority Areas provide a guide for annual tracking and reporting outcomes in an EcoPark System Report Card. The Priority Areas also direct resource allocation for EcoPark Staff planning and budgeting.

Memorandums of Understanding

The City of Hamilton has signed 2 previous MOUs in 2013 (Report PED08009b / PW12082) and 2016 (Report PW15082a). The current MOU was signed for the period of 2016-2021. The MOU establishes a framework for joint decision-making among the Partners on matters concerning the EcoPark System and establishes a Governing Council and a Management Committee. City of Hamilton's City Manager or designate is the City's representative on the Governing Council. The Manager of Community Planning and GIS, Planning Division, represents the City of Hamilton on the Management Committee.

Progress on the EcoPark has been substantial. Achievements include:

- Completion of all six Heritage Lands Management Plans and endorsement by City of Hamilton Council;
- Addition of 127 hectares of land secured through purchase and donation since the signing of the first MOU in 2013;

- Securement of \$2,400,000 in funding from Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, the Ontario Trillium Foundation and other funding agencies.
- Completion of priority research projects including Wildlife Corridor Mapping;
- Completion of ecological restoration, invasive management and recovery of species at risk projects;
- Continuation of the stewardship programs which includes private land-owner outreach and community wide stewardship events and workshops;
- Ongoing meetings of the Hamilton-Burlington Trails Council to advance and promote outdoor recreational opportunities and develop harmonized trail system mapping and signage within the EcoPark System and beyond; and,
- Discussions with Provincial and Federal Government represents regarding recognition of the EcoPark System.

Ongoing participation in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Governing Council and Management Committee will assist the City of Hamilton in meeting the Natural Heritage goals established in the Urban Hamilton Official Plan and Rural Hamilton Official Plan, while working cooperatively with partner agencies within and adjacent to City of Hamilton. The partnership approach of the EcoPark system allows for information and resource sharing which assists in the long term protection of headwater areas, supporting healthy streams and improved water quality in Cootes Paradise and Hamilton Harbour.

Annual financial contributions from each partner agency is identified in Table 1 of the 2022 – 2026 MOU Plan (“Appendix B” to Report PED21120). The City of Hamilton’s annual contributions increase from \$15,937 to \$17,251 annually (the annual is based on a 2% inflation rate). The proposed total contribution over five years is \$82,936. Under the previous MOU, the City’s total contribution were \$81,754. The total financial commitment going forward is in line with is in line with past contributions.

An interim extension to the current MOU to the effective date of the 2022 – 2026 MOU provides time for the endorsement of the new Strategic Plan to occur by the partners and for the finalization and signing of the MOU to occur. In addition, the extension allows for the operational activities of the Secretariat, Governing Council and Management Committee to continue, including on going projects coordinated through the Secretariat. No additional funds from partners are required for the extension.

The 2021 Strategic Plan and 2022 – 2026 MOU have been vetted and endorsed by partner agency and City of Hamilton staff, Management Committee and Governing Council.

It is recommended that City of Hamilton continue to participate in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System has a partner agency and continue to implement the established vision.

ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Council could choose to not endorse the 2021 Strategic Plan:

One option would be to not endorse the 2021 Strategic Plan (attached as Appendix “A” to Report PED21120) which would have an impact on the Secretariats ability to implement the initiatives and established vision of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark since its inception in 2007.

This alternative is not recommended since the City of Hamilton has been a significant partner in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark Governing Council and Management Committee since 2007 and would prevent Hamilton from guiding and providing input into the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

2. Council could choose to not endorse the 2022 – 2026 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU):

The City of Hamilton is a key partner in the implementation of the EcoPark System and much of the land area of the EcoPark system is within the City's boundary. This option would remove the City of Hamilton from the partnership. It is recommended that staff continue to participate in the implementation of the EcoPark Vision.

This alternative is not recommended as the City of Hamilton has been supportive of this collaborative initiative since 2007 and has derived benefits from the partnership.

3. Council could choose to not approve the financial support to the Secretariat Office as outlined in Table 1 of the 2022 – 2026 Memorandum of Understanding (attached as Appendix “B” to Report PED21120):

This alternative is not recommended. If this alternative is chosen, it is possible that the City of Hamilton would be the only partner not providing financial support.

This would be of concern because much of the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System land area lies within the City's boundaries.

ALIGNMENT TO THE 2016 – 2025 STRATEGIC PLAN

Community Engagement and Participation

Hamilton has an open, transparent and accessible approach to City government that engages with and empowers all citizens to be involved in their community

Healthy and Safe Communities

Hamilton is a safe and supportive City where people are active, healthy, and have a high quality of life.

Clean and Green

Hamilton is environmentally sustainable with a healthy balance of natural and urban spaces.

Built Environment and Infrastructure

Hamilton is supported by state-of-the-art infrastructure, transportation options, buildings and public spaces that create a dynamic City.

Culture and Diversity

Hamilton is a thriving, vibrant place for arts, culture, and heritage where diversity and inclusivity are embraced and celebrated.

Our People and Performance

Hamiltonians have a high level of trust and confidence in their City government.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Appendix "A" to Report PED21120 – Strategic Plan

Appendix "B" to Report PED21120 – Memorandum of Understanding

Appendix "C" to Report PED21120 – Consultation Report