

Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System 2021-2030 Strategic Plan Implementation Consultation Report

In October 2020, the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System Governing Council approved posting of the draft text of the 2021-2030 EcoPark System Strategic Plan for public comment. This included a 30-day on-line period for public consultation and stakeholder engagement, for feedback on implementation. This consultation would precede presentation of the finalized plan to all EcoPark System partner agencies for approval by their Boards and Councils.

Between November 2020 and March 2021, the EcoPark System held seven meetings for consultations, and posted the Strategic Plan on the web site for public comment from November 19 to December 19, 2020. This resulted in insights from 22 partner and stakeholder staff members and comments from three members of the public. The following report summarizes the consultation process, feedback from participants and recommendations for next steps for the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System.

Background

The 2021-2030 Strategic Plan is an update to the goals and objectives set out in the 2009 plan. Consultations and workshops for this strategic plan began in early 2019 and involved representatives of the participating agencies as well as a diversity of interested individuals from various other organizations and perspectives. The plan sets priorities and objectives for the EcoPark System partner agencies to achieve by 2030 and a framework for tracking and reporting back on each of these objectives.

Consultation Process

The text of the 2021-2030 Strategic Plan was posted on the EcoPark System from November 19 to December 19. Social media posts were regularly shared by partner agencies throughout that period.

Relevant staff and Management Committee members from Cootes to Escarpment partner agencies attended the following focused meetings to provide feedback on related strategic priorities:

- Trails and McMaster University (November 19, 2020)
- Stewardship Subcommittee (November 30, 2020)
- EcoPark System Partner Fundraising and Grants Staff (December 2, 2020)
- Stewardship and Private Landowners (December 4, 2020)
- Conservation Authorities (January 25, 2021)
- Municipal Staff (February 4, 2021)

In addition, representatives from the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce and Burlington Economic Development Corporation met with the EcoPark System Coordinator and Management Committee Chair on February 5, 2021 to discuss shared priorities.

Feedback on Emerging Project Priorities

Three members of the public and 22 EcoPark System partner staff and stakeholders engaged in this process. The following feedback was provided on 2021-2030 strategic priorities:

1. Stewardship: emphasize joint invasive species and encroachment planning and consider monitoring projects that can be applied across EcoPark System partner owned properties.
2. Trail Management: explore opportunities for a joint trail management strategy and signage.
3. Incorporation or Charitable Status: Consider incorporation and/or a possible charitable number in the form of an NGO, foundation, charity, or other for the EcoPark System.
4. Communications: Highlight success stories and case studies such as Canal Park, the Brighton Beach Bioswale, Hopkins Tract, and the Sheelah Dunn Dooley Nature Sanctuary. Continue providing opportunities and resources for partner agency staff to connect and collaborate.
5. Engaging New Partners: seek out partnerships with the private sector, agricultural community and continue exploring opportunities with federal and provincial bodies.
6. Research: Seek opportunities to increase partner agency knowledge and understanding of their landscape.

Recommendations Regarding Overall EcoPark System Program

1. Three members of the public commented on several overall aspects of the EcoPark System Partnership and made suggestions for alternatives. They also emphasized the urgent nature of land securement and fund raising to protect additional areas.
2. Partner agencies staff involved in fund-raising recommended further work on the basis for collaboration around fund raising for major items such as land securement and provided a recommendation for a research initiative to investigate creation of an incorporated body to deal with fund raising.

2021-2030 Strategic Plans Recommendations

- No changes were recommended to the text of the 2021-2030 Strategic Plan.

Next Steps

As a result of this consultation the EcoPark System Secretariat will address the following with support from Management Committee and Governing Council:

1. Work with partner communication professionals to re-evaluate public perception of EcoPark System and provide opportunities for members of the public to be a part of implementing strategic priorities.
2. Investigate options for organizational models for the EcoPark System Alliance, including as appropriate seeking legal advice.
3. Support the EcoPark System Stewardship Subcommittee and Hamilton-Burlington Trails Council.
4. Continue exploring partnership opportunities with the private sector, government bodies, and research institutions.

Additional Reading:

- Report on December 2 Finance, Grant, and Fundraising EcoPark System Meeting
- Report on February 5 Private Sector Engagement with the EcoPark System Meeting
- Comments – Chapman, Baetz, Vanderbrug