
Subject: Acquisition of Eco-Park lands - Glendale District Plan

Report to: Planning and Economic Development Committee

Report date: Wednesday, April 14, 2021

Recommendations

1. That Regional Council **BE DIRECTED** to send the letters, attached as Appendix I to Report PDS 22-2021, to the Federal Minister of Transport and the Provincial Minister of Transportation, respectively.
2. That the attached letters also **BE CIRCULATED** to the Niagara Members of Parliament, Members of Provincial Parliament, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation, Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, and the City of St. Catharines.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to outline considerations for securing lands in pursuit of an Eco Park as envisioned in the recently endorsed Glendale District Plan.
- The Eco Park is proposed for 70 hectares (172 acres) located outside of the Glendale settlement area boundary. The current ownership of the lands lies with Transport Canada (46 hectares) and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (24 hectares).
- Niagara has an identified shortage of large parks, with a recent study indicating it has the second lowest amount of parkland space per resident in the Greater Golden Horseshoe.
- Staff have undertaken preliminary discussions on the Eco Park and the positions set out in this Report are supported by NPCA and Town Staff in Niagara-on-the Lake. In addition, the park concept was subject to the larger Glendale District Plan consultation process and received support from the community.
- Staff are seeking Council endorsement and direction to determine if the lands can be leased or sold at a nominal amount to the Region, NPCA or Town. Two letters, attached as Appendix I, have been prepared to formally make this request.

Financial Considerations

There are no financial considerations at this time. The feedback received from the Federal Government and Province will help establish financial considerations. A future report will provide these details, if applicable.

Analysis

The Glendale District Plan is a Council-endorsed proactive development strategy which supports growth and economic prosperity. It establishes the long-term commitment to Glendale becoming a mixed use, vibrant and complete community where residents can meet their daily living needs.

Through the District Plan process, the Region, in collaboration with the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake (NOTL) and the City of St. Catharines, identified the subject lands for a future Eco Park. The Eco Park is approximately 70 hectares (172 acres) located outside of the Glendale settlement area boundary. The current ownership of the lands lies with Transport Canada (46 hectares) and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (24 hectares).

The District Plan identified 9 key directions for achieving the vision of a complete Glendale community. The establishment of the Eco Park would directly contribute to 3 of these directions: the protection and enhancement of natural features, the addition of trails and active transportation connections and the creation of public/civic space.

Through numerous consultation activities with both stakeholders and the public, there was support expressed for the inclusion of the Eco Park. The desire to enhance and provide connection to this natural area was echoed throughout the District Plan process.

In addition to being located in the Glendale district, the lands identified for the Eco Park are within the Greenbelt Plan area. The Greenbelt designation permits passive parkland or agricultural uses.

Unlike other Greenbelt lands north of the QEW highway, the Eco Park site contains a mix of soil, including a significant amount of fill that was placed on the site when the current Welland Canal was excavated. In addition, the site contains significant woodlands that are part of the Greenbelt Natural Heritage System.

Due to the Greenbelt and natural heritage constraints noted above, the District Plan's recommendation for the Eco Park is to undertake additional consultation with the owners, local municipality and the NPCA to advance the initiative described in this Report. Through this consultation, the Region and agencies will determine the opportunities for recreational uses, a trail system, agriculturally-supportive uses or other uses deemed appropriate.

State of Large Parks in Ontario

Notwithstanding some prized parkland in Niagara, such as Short Hills Provincial Park and the Niagara Parks Commission's holdings, a 2019 report undertaken by the Toronto Region Conservation Authority and Credit Valley Conservation Authority titled The State of Large Parks in Ontario's Golden Horseshoe¹ set out that Niagara ranked second lowest (behind Toronto) compared to the 7 Greater Golden Horseshoe municipalities in parkland space per resident.

Ontario's *Growth Plan* states that municipalities should be planning for complete communities with convenient access to "an appropriate supply of safe, publicly accessible open spaces, parks, trails, and other recreational facilities". However, in Niagara, acquisition of sites for large parks has been challenging due to factors such as land prices and land acquisition funds.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has illustrated the value and demand for parkland in Niagara. Currently, Niagara has approximately 3 hectares of parkland per 1000 residents. If no new parkland is added in Niagara, that number is expected to drop to approximately 2 hectares of parkland per 1000 residents by 2041. In comparison, Halton Region has approximately 8 hectares of parkland per 1000 residents, and the City of Hamilton has 6 hectares of parkland per 1000 resident.

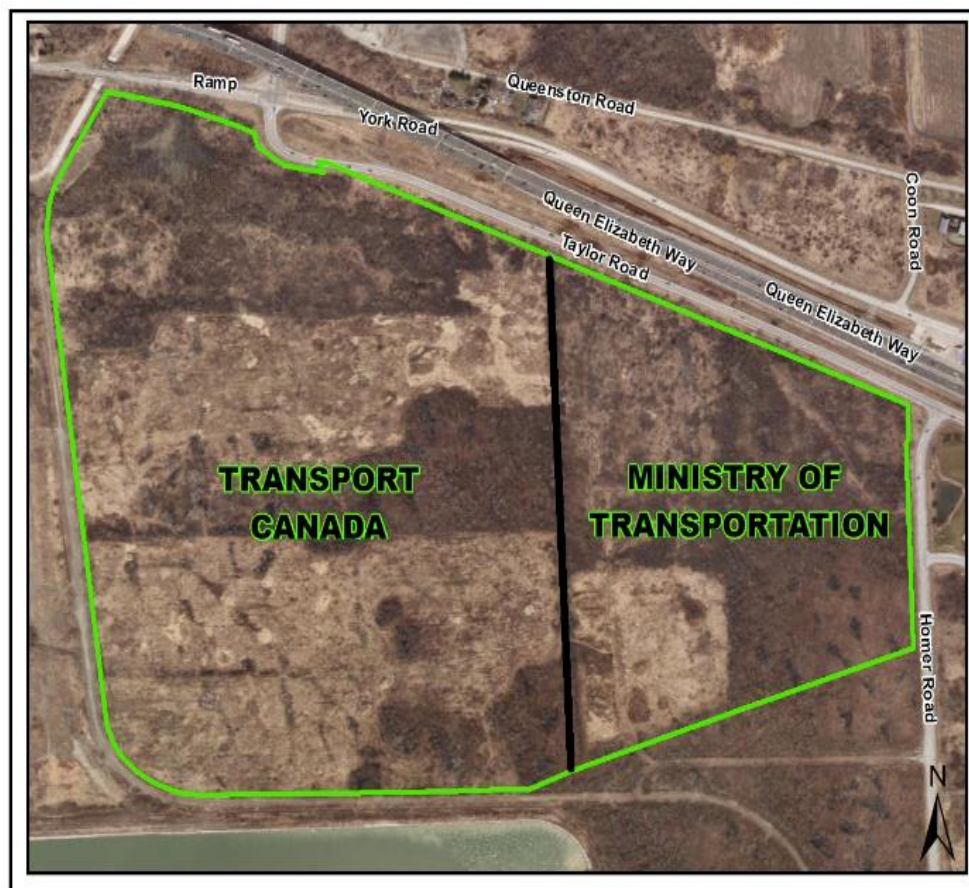
This report further identifies the opportunity to market large parks for tourism. The Eco Park can contribute to the range of offerings already available in Glendale and provide additional options to attract visitors to Glendale and the Region.

¹ https://greeninfrastructureontario.org/app/uploads/2019/06/StateofParks_Report-Final.pdf

Surplus Lands

Transport Canada has shared a list of properties they wish to divest with Regional Staff. These properties were previously under the portfolio of the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation (SLSMC) and were declared surplus to Welland Canal needs.

One of the Transport Canada parcels (identified as NN-026-C by the Federal Government) is located within the area for the proposed Eco Park. The parcel is approximately 46 hectares in size, is vacant, and contains a mix wooded areas and meadow. The Eco Park is shown in a green outline, with land ownership noted, on the map below.



The Region indicated interest in Transport Canada parcel as it aligns with the work and vision of the Glendale District Plan. Transport Canada has established a market value price of \$3 million for their land. However, Regional Staff have noted several inaccuracies in establishing that market value.

To support the Region's interest in this property, two attached letters (Appendix I) have been prepared for circulation to the respective Federal and Provincial agencies. The purpose of the attached letters is to highlight the Eco Park concept and to request consideration for lease or a nominal sum purchase of the Transport Canada site.

Consultation

As noted earlier in this report, the Eco Park concept was well-received by the community through the District Plan consultation process. Through this process, the Region also engaged the St. Lawrence Seaway Authority to discuss preliminary details for this area.

Regional staff approached and had general discussions with the NPCA, Town Staff in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and the Greenbelt Foundation. The Eco Park concept has received positive support and the Region will continue to build on these discussions as this project moves forward to ascertain partnerships and ongoing stewardship.

Conclusion

Niagara is in need of additional large park space.

Due to its Greenbelt designation and existing natural heritage features, the lands described in this Report are well-positioned to create passive recreational opportunities, while allowing for habitat enhancement.

An Eco Park will add value to the community by supporting the connection to nature, offering opportunities that will contribute to improved physical and mental health for residents and visitors.

The acquisition of the land for the Eco Park would be quick win for the Glendale District Plan.

Alternatives Reviewed

Council could choose not to send the letter attached in Appendix I and direct staff to work through the Real Estate process to purchase the lands. This alternative would result in a future report outlining the details of the appraisal process and the financial implications of acquiring the lands.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The development of an Eco Park, regardless of who owns and operates it, contributes to Council's Strategic Priority of creating Healthy and Vibrant Communities.

Other Pertinent Reports

PDS 27-2020 Endorsement of the Glendale District Plan

PDS 5-2021 Recommendation Report for Regional Official Plan Amendment 17 – Glendale District Plan

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Appendices

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| Appendix 1 | Letter to the Federal Ministers of Transportation, Public Services & Procurement, and the Provincial Minister of Transportation |
| Appendix 2 | Glendale District Plan Demonstration Plan and Key Directions |