
MEMORANDUM

PDS-C 30-2023

Subject: Eco-Park Initiative Update

Date: July 12, 2023

To: Planning and Economic Development Committee

From: Karen Costantini, Senior Planner

The purpose of this memo is to provide an update on the Eco-Park project. The Eco-Park lands are located in the Town of Niagara on the Lake (NOTL), within the Glendale District Plan area, and bordered by the Welland Canal along the west side. A location map is included as Appendix 1. The lands are 70 hectares in size, vacant and contain a mix of wooded areas and meadow. Current ownership lies with Transport Canada (46 hectares) and the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (24 hectares).

In 2018, Transport Canada shared with Regional staff a list of properties they wished to divest. These properties were under the portfolio of the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corporation (SLSMC) and were declared surplus to Welland Canal needs. The possibility of the Region establishing an Eco-Park through a lease or purchase of the lands, was originally proposed through the Council endorsed Glendale District Plan (2020). The District Plan outlined nine key directions for achieving the vision of a complete Glendale community. The establishment of the Eco-Park would directly contribute to three 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. The Eco-Park was identified by staff as a one-time park-establishment opportunity to integrate significant greenspace into the larger Glendale District Plan.

Through the approval of report PDS 22-2021, Acquisition of Eco-Park lands - Glendale District Plan, correspondence was sent from the Regional Chair's office to both the Federal Minister of Transport and the Provincial Minister of Transportation, respectively, to request consideration of a lease or purchase agreement for the lands identified for the Eco-Park initiative. Favourable responses were received from each Ministry, with support for the project offered in principle.

The Ministry of Transportation, on their portion of the subject land, indicated there is highly positive future support for the Eco-Park, but identified the lands as temporarily unavailable until adjacent highway improvements are completed. Discussions with Ministry will continue to determine if alternate lands can be utilized for future provincial roadwork, and the appropriate time to bring the provincially-owned lands into the Eco-Park project.

Initial response from Transport Canada supported the establishment of an Eco-Park and a long-term lease between the Niagara Region and the SLSMC on behalf of Transport Canada. Subsequently, Regional staff were connected with representatives of the SLSMC, and through further discussions between the groups, a formal business case for the establishment of the Eco-Park was formally requested by the SLSMC.

In 2022, Regional Planning staff developed a business case for the Eco-Park project, which lays out potential improvements for the site, including the creation of a parking area, a formalized network of trails, vegetative rehabilitation and pollinator gardens, and interactive site enhancements. The business case also identifies and analyzes factors highlighted by the SLSMC and regional staff as important considerations for the lands, including accessibility and security. The business case was sent to the SLSMC in October of 2022.

Recent discussions with the SLSMC indicate positive feedback of the business case, and continued support for the establishment of the park as an ideal land use and buffer to canal transport activities, as well as a favourable environmental initiative. Regional staff are under the understanding that the next step for the Eco-Park lease is dependent on SLSMC receiving approval from Transport Canada for a variety of projects and long-term leases, including the Eco-Park lands. Regional staff anticipate the details of the proposed nominal amount lease can be formally derived once the SLSMC finalizes discussions with Transport Canada.

Regional staff have continued to emphasize the desire for a long-term lease agreement, in order to fully ensure the potential of the lands as a public Eco-Park and restoration site. A long-term lease will also assist with partnerships and funding opportunities. The establishment of an Eco-Park remains an excellent way to make a positive contribution to Niagara's parkland needs. 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. The park continues to represent an advantageous opportunity to create new park space, improve public well-being, and support commitments and actions on climate change and sustainability identified in the Niagara Official Plan.

While Planning staff have set a primary goal for 2023 to establish a formal lease agreement with the SLSMC, additional research on the Eco-Park potential has continued. Regional planning and ecology staff visited the site in August 2022, to identify a possible public property access point, parking lot placement and trail options, as well as review security requirements of the adjacent canal area. Regional staff have also recently consulted with staff from the NPCA on their recent experiences with establishing accessible trail and parking access at some of their conservation areas.

The establishment of a completed trail system with signage and any other additional features, is anticipated to take 3-5 years to complete, however, staff are optimistic that the Eco-Park can serve as a site of some native tree planting in 2024 through the ongoing programming of the established Regional Greening Strategy. Regional staff have kept the Town of NOTL and the NPCA apprised of Eco-Park developments, and anticipate project partnerships will be key to the successful establishment of the park.

Staff will continue to dialogue with the SLSMC, and anticipate reporting back to Council with further information, once available, through future reports to Planning and Economic Development Committee.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Karen Costantini, M.A.
Senior Planner

Other Pertinent Reports

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

PDS 22-2021 Acquisition of Eco-Park lands - Glendale District Plan

CWCD 2021-192 Glendale District Eco-Park Update

Appendices

Appendix 1 Location Map of Eco-Park