
The Corporation of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake Information Report to Council

SUBJECT: Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority – Draft Strategies
DATE: 2024-12-03
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PREPARED BY: Steve Burke, Manager of Policy Planning and Heritage
DEPARTMENT: Community & Development Services

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On October 18, 2024, the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA) was directed to circulate the following documents to local municipalities for review and comment:

- Draft **Watershed-based Resource Management Strategy**; and,
- Draft **Conservation Area Strategy**.

Both documents have been prepared by NPCA in response to Ontario Regulation 686/21: Mandatory Programs and Services under Section 21.1(1)2 of the *Conservation Authorities Act* and must be completed by December 31, 2024. This regulation prescribes programs and services that a Conservation Authority must provide within its area of jurisdiction and requires them to prepare an inventory of programs and services and identify:

- **Category 1: Mandatory Programs and Services**, such as natural hazard management, which all conservation authorities must provide in their jurisdiction;
- **Category 2: Municipal Programs and Services** provided at the request of a municipality, such as tree planting and technical research;
- **Category 3: Other Programs and Services** determined by the conservation authority as advisable to further the purposes of the *Conservation Authorities Act*, such as restoration, stewardship and watershed monitoring.

The NPCA Inventory of Programs and Services lists five Key Service Areas: Natural Hazard Management, Watershed Resource Management and Climate Change, Other Watershed-Related Programs, Conservation Authority Lands and Conservation Areas, and Enabling Services.

NPCA 10-year Strategic Plan

The NPCA has a 10-year Strategic Plan based on a set of Strategic Priorities with related goals and actions:

- Healthy and Climate Resilient Watersheds – includes supporting municipalities with watershed data collection and analysis, such as the pending Four Mile Creek Watershed Plan;
- Support Sustainable Growth – includes development plan review and leading integrated watershed management, such as implementing a proactive sub-watershed program to inform sub-watershed planning for growth areas;
- Connecting People to Nature – includes trail development and promoting recreation;
- Partner of Choice – includes Memorandums of Understanding and Service Level Agreements with municipalities;
- Organization Excellence;
- Financial Sustainability – includes demonstrating the value of NPCA programs and services to municipal partners.

Draft Watershed-based Resource Management Strategy (Appendix I)

As per O. Reg. 686/21, conservation authorities must prepare a Watershed-based Resource Management Strategy which includes the following components:

- Guiding principles and objectives that inform the design and delivery of Mandatory Programs and Services;
- A summary of existing technical studies and information that the conservation authority relies on to inform and support the delivery of Mandatory Programs and Services;
- A review of the Mandatory Programs and Services to:
 - Determine if the programs and services comply with the regulations under the Act and the review of applications under prescribed Acts;
 - Identify and analyze issues and risks that limit the effectiveness of these programs and services; and,
 - Identify actions to address the identified issues and risks and provide a cost estimate for implementing those actions.
- A process for periodic review and updating of the Strategy, including a procedure to consult the public.

The NPCA has integrated guiding principles and objectives from its 10-year Strategic Plan into the Strategy, summarized information the NPCA relies on to inform and support program and service delivery and identified any risks to effective program and service delivery, including any actions to address those risks.

The Draft Strategy also identifies issues and challenges that limit the effectiveness of program and service delivery as follows:

- Climate variability and change: Adaptation efforts include flood management, ecosystem enhancement, municipal plan review/input, and green infrastructure/stormwater management. Mitigation efforts include green building technology, energy conservation, and low impact development.
- Increased Growth Pressures on Watersheds: NPCA has a role in supporting municipalities in development review, maintaining updated policies, and mapping regulated areas.
- Loss of Biodiversity, Species at Risk, Habitat and Natural Cover: NPCA needs to update its Natural Areas Inventory to assist in the protection of natural areas.
- Invasive Species: NPCA needs an Invasive Species Strategy.
- Impacts on Water Quality: The NPCA Water Quality Monitoring Program indicates many NPCA watersheds have marginal to poor water quality, with agricultural non-point sources the predominant cause, but increasingly urban stormwater management point sources. NPCA current programs and services (Enhanced Watershed Monitoring and Reporting, Enhanced Watershed Restoration and Stewardship) to proactively mitigate water quality impacts.

The Draft Strategy is also required to identify actions to address issues and risks. The Draft Strategy does not provide a detailed list of proposed actions but indicates that significant investment in an Integrated Watershed Management approach is the primary means to address the issues and challenges of the Niagara watershed. This approach includes watershed scale monitoring, watershed scale studies/plans/strategies, and watershed wide actions including stewardship, outreach and education. Emphasis on a restoration strategy for Four Mile Creek watershed can be guided by needs/actions recommended in an updated watershed plan.

Draft Conservation Area Strategy (Appendix II)

As per O. Reg. 686/21, conservation authorities must prepare a Watershed-based Resource Management Strategy which includes the following components:

- Objectives to inform conservation authority decision-making related to the lands it owns and controls, including acquisition and disposition of lands;
- Identification of mandatory and non-mandatory programs and services provided on land owned and controlled by the conservation authority, including sources of financing;
- An assessment of how these lands may augment any natural heritage located within the Niagara watershed and integrate other provincially or municipally owned lands or publicly accessible lands and trails;
- Categorization of land use to classify NPCA lands based on the types of activities on each parcel;
- A process for periodic review and updating of the Strategy, including a procedure to consult the public.

The NPCA has integrated guiding principles and objectives from its 10-year Strategic Plan into the Strategy, building on the overall NPCA vision. The Strategic Priorities of the 10-year Strategic Plan are noted above.

The Draft Strategy has five Goals created to support the priorities of the 10-year Strategic Plan:

1. Protection and Management
2. Greenspace Access and Connectivity
3. Sustainability and Enhancement
4. Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation
5. Engagement and Collaboration

Detailed plans for specific conservation areas are not the focus of the Strategy.

The Draft Strategy classifies each of the 41 NPCA conservation areas into four broad land use categories to indicate the general purpose of area, not specific programs or activities:

1. Conservation Area – Active Recreation: 4 conservation areas
2. Conservation Area – Passive Recreation: 8 conservation areas
3. Natural Heritage: 27 conservation areas, including the two conservation areas in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Two Mile Creek and Virgil Dam and Reservoir
4. Administration Area: 2 conservation areas

NPCA has 61% (1,842 ha) of conservation areas classified as Natural Heritage, which is considered a healthy balance between more accessible conservation areas and those that focus on natural heritage protection, consistent with other conservation authorities. This includes 11 conservation areas within the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System.

Two Mile Creek Conservation Area protects the watercourse, associated wetlands and the Lake Ontario shoreline, while Virgil Dam and Reservoir Conservation Area protects the watercourse.

NPCA used a consolidated map layer of the Niagara Region Natural Environment System and the Provincial Natural Heritage System layers of the Greenbelt Plan and Growth Plan to access how NPCA conservation areas augment the natural heritage in the watershed. Nearly all NPCA conservation areas are located within the natural heritage system boundaries and enhance the ecosystem services and biodiversity of the watershed.

The NPCA 10-year Strategic Plan calls for the development of a strategy for land acquisition to improve upon the current 56 percent in the Niagara watershed of what science suggests is needed for healthy and sustainable watersheds. NPCA recently developed the 2022-2032 Land Securement Strategy. The Strategy has the following objectives:

- Secure public greenspace using clear and concise decision-making;
- Collaborate with municipal partners, Indigenous communities and others on mutual land securement goals;
- Implement sustainable, innovative financial models that support land securement

To make connections with local municipalities NPCA launched the Trees for All program to increase the tree cover in the watershed through tree planting. NPCA has collaborated with municipalities to identify lands that have the potential for restoration. The Town will investigate opportunities to participate in this program.

Niagara Parks have significant land holdings along the Niagara River and NPCA has worked with Niagara Parks to improve shoreline habitat and ecosystems through the Niagara River Remedial Action Plan, a bi-national agreement between Canada and the United States.

NEXT STEP / CONCLUSION

The NPCA must approve the two Draft Strategy documents by December 31, 2024 according to O. Reg. 686/21 and so the documents must be brought to the NPCA Board on or before December 13, 2024.

Town staff will continue to work with the NPCA to implement its 10-year Strategic Plan in areas of mutual interest, such as the Four-Mile Creek Watershed Plan, as outlined in the two Draft Strategy documents.

ATTACHMENTS

- Appendix I – Draft Watershed-based Resource Management Strategy
- Appendix II – Draft Conservation Areas Strategy