

Executive Summary

Vision Statement

To become one of Conservation Halton's regionally significant Niagara Escarpment Parks protecting and sustaining the unique escarpment environments as well as providing excellence in high quality educational and outdoor passive recreational visitor experiences through the provision of enhanced facilities and amenities

Significant Attributes of Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area at Present

Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area possesses an impressive array of natural and cultural heritage features including:

- Ninety-seven habitat types at the Rattlesnake Point Complex Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA), covering 295 hectares including interior forests, expansive valley wetlands and prominent escarpment cliff and rim features;
- A network of 15.5 kilometres of hiking trails, featuring forest trails, boardwalk, scenic canyon lookouts and trail connections to adjacent natural areas and the Bruce Trail;
- Part of the Niagara Escarpment UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and identified as a Natural Environment Park under the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System;
- Identification as a Provincially Significant Life Science Area of Natural and Scientific Interest representing the Crawford Lake/Milton Outlier Valley Life Science ANSI and Lowville Re-entrant Valley Earth Science ANSI features;
- Provincially Significant Wetlands for the Nassagaweya Canyon Wetland
- Over 596 plant species (7 rare, 23 uncommon), 50 bird species (7 rare, 11 uncommon), 11 mammal species (1 rare), 18 fish species, 5 reptiles (2 rare), and 7 amphibians (1 uncommon) can be found in the conservation area and the immediate surrounding area;
- Protected habitat for 14 species at risk as well as 3 globally rare and 7 provincially rare habitat types, and 31 ancient Eastern White Cedars, the oldest of which is 600 years old;
- Individual and group attendance figures indicate over 72,563 visitors in 2013;
- Existing natural heritage features provide the equivalent of \$1.4 million in ecosystem services annually;
- The best outdoor rock climbing face in the Greater Toronto Area;
- Panoramic scenic lookouts extending 50 kilometres or more; and,
- Overnight group camping facilities.

Existing Policy Framework

The *Master Plan for Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area* builds on and supports existing Conservation Halton and Provincial policy documents including the *Conservation Halton Strategic Plan*, *Halton Escarpment Parks – A Limestone Legacy* and the *Niagara Escarpment Plan (2005)*.

The *Conservation Halton Strategic Plan, towards a Healthy Watershed (2009-2013)* identifies a series of primary mandated programs that are an integral part of the *Master Plan for Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area* including environmental protection, water resources management, forest resources management, and lifelong education and recreation.

The *Limestone Legacy* document outlines a draft strategy to protect and enhance Halton's system of Escarpment conservation areas through a unique partnership between Halton Region and Conservation Halton.

Within the provincial *Niagara Escarpment Plan (2005)*, Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area is recognized as a key component of the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System and is designated as a Natural Environment Park that permits activities including high quality, low to moderate intensity recreation such as hiking, rock climbing and nature viewing to picnic sites and un-serviced group campsites.

Summary of Significant Issues and Challenges

Financial Constraints: Over the past 20 years, with changes in government and priorities, Conservation Halton's funding for park development and enhancement has almost disappeared. The result is that Conservation Halton has been primarily using conservation area revenues to offset operating expenses with limited funds for basic capital maintenance work, new facilities or tools to monitor environmental impact. Currently there is no real base-level capital-funding source. This limited funding has resulted in the deterioration of natural heritage features, facilities and amenities as well as the quality of the visitor experience. Limited funding threatens Conservation Halton's ability to continue to protect and maintain, let alone improve or enhance the conservation area

Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area, as with the other Conservation Halton parks, suffers due to the impacts of severely limited tax supported funding. Funding models in many other Conservation Authorities in Southern Ontario include regional, municipal and/or provincial tax levy support. Additionally, development charges, permit fees and other associated development fees are charged against Conservation Halton for park capital development projects. Other park agencies in the region are normally exempt from these fees and charges.

Growth in Visitation: Over the last five years, Conservation Halton parks have experienced a 9.4 per cent annual increase in visitation, while the regional population has grown at a rate of 4.5 per cent over the same period. This growth trend is projected to continue, if not accelerate over the next ten years. This growth represents regional resident's positive attitude towards participation and interest in healthy-lifestyle pursuits in conservation, but also represents a threat to the sensitive natural ecology of the site unless properly managed and serviced with the appropriate facilities.

Natural Heritage Protection: Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area's unique and diverse natural heritage features are generally well protected and secure but some deterioration was identified at certain heavily used locations along the trails and lookout areas. This plan highlights the need for stronger monitoring and protection measures, especially in light of the growing population and visitation projections.

Cultural Heritage Protection: There is one registered archaeological site of low cultural value within the Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area.

Visitor Experience: While the natural features of the Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area are spectacular and definitely place it among Ontario's premier natural park destinations for visitors, the present built amenities, facilities and infrastructure are somewhat lacking and subsequently counterproductive to the experience and messaging intended; this is due to chronic underfunding

Education and Programming: The educational programming at Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area is a limited component. Given its unique scenic viewing opportunities, rock climbing activities and related recreational trails, there is definite potential to enhance this aspect of the programming.

Recommended Policies

This master plan has been developed to support Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area as a significant regional destination for local visitors and tourists:

- Ensures protection and enhancement of the natural heritage and cultural spaces of the site;
- Promotes environmental values, excellence in education, healthy lifestyles and outdoor recreation;
- Prescribes a workable visitor impact management strategy(VIM) that addresses the expected increased visitation and any accompanying potential impacts;
- Specifies development requirements and standards that meet the appropriate level of design excellence in high quality educational, interpretive and recreational facilities, programs and amenities; and,
- Outlines a realistic financial management strategy that defines funding and revenue generation requirements, potential partnerships, management and operational costs and that aims at ensuring long-term viability.

Highlights of the Development Proposal

The proposed master plan identifies a range of new facilities to provide enhanced natural heritage protection, visitor experience, amenities, educational and interpretive opportunities and recreational conveniences. Financial and environmental sustainability are defining, and in some cases limiting factors in the proposed list of master plan recommendations. Some of the proposed development may be exempted from requiring a Niagara Escarpment Development Permit in accordance with section 5.41 of Ontario Regulation 828/90. The main elements of the master plan are summarized as follows:

- Improve trail systems, lookout points and rock climbing areas to ensure protection and enhancement of the natural heritage features.
- Remove five campsites in upper area, designating the entire upper area as day use.
- Expanded existing lower campsite area to include five new sites and a 10 car parking lot.
- Fence around wood storage area to create maintenance compound.
- A system of entrance, directional, interpretive and other signage that is consistently branded across all Conservation Halton conservation areas and standardized to meet accessibility, readability, risk management and marketing objectives.

- A well-designed system of small-scale roads and parking areas that promotes a positive sense of arrival as well as safety and security for visitors, tastefully designed to harmonize with the natural setting of the park.
- An automatic gated entrance
- An additional picnic shelter in the lower park area.
- Site technology upgrades relative to telephone and video surveillance (future).
- Renovate existing gatehouse
- Additional site furnishings such as bike racks, garbage receptacles, benches and picnic tables.
- Accessibility upgrades for all buildings and pathways to meet the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities (AODA) built environment standards.
- Site service upgrades including potable water, electrical service and wastewater treatment utilizing sustainable technologies that demonstrate the environmental values associated with the site.
- Consider acquisition of additional lands for future expansion of the administrative facilities, recreational programming sites and natural heritage features and requirements.

Overall Capital Development Costs

Overall capital development cost for the build out of the proposed master plan for the Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area amounts to approximately **\$6.1 million** over a ten-year period. A generalized breakdown of this amount is summarized below.

Signage and directional	\$ 95,000
Roads and parking	\$ 1,656, 500
Picnic and site furnishings	\$ 165,000
Site upgrades/infrastructure	\$ 225,000
Trails	\$ 344,500
Restoration of natural features	\$ 2, 070,000
Visitors Impact Management Plan (\$15,000 /yr.)	\$ 150,000
Subtotal	\$ 4, 706,000
<u>Soft costs, fees, contingency (30%)</u>	<u>\$ 1, 411,800</u>
Total	\$ 6, 117,800

Overview of Financial Parameters

The key financial and related parameters of the development plan for Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area are as follows:

- The cost of the development plan for Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area over the 10-year development timeframe is approximately \$6.1 million (measured in terms of 2010 dollars) and a stable base-level capital-funding source must be established to facilitate plan implementation.
- Attendance at the conservation area is expected to grow significantly to just over 111,000 by the year 2020.

- While more visitors will generate increased revenues, the analysis demonstrates that this by itself will not be sufficient to offset the higher costs of operation; however, despite increased operating costs, Rattlesnake Point Conservation Area can operate on a break even basis, or even generate a small surplus, through a variety of strategies.
- To provide the enhanced level of customer services and environmental protection called for in this master plan, and not incur an operating deficit, a pricing study must be undertaken to determine how to increase net revenues or identify means to subsidize operating costs.

Putting it in Context – Conservation Halton’s Contributions to Society and the Environment

Conservation Halton creates significant direct economic benefit in the community. The operations of the Conservation Halton plus the expenditures of visitors, who come to the region to utilize the programs and services offered, create nearly \$12 million of additional gross domestic product (GDP) in Halton Region alone. This is associated with 274 jobs in the Region, \$8.4 million in wages and salaries and \$5.7 million in additional taxes paid. If this were a single business or industry, it would be recognized as a significant component of the economic base of the Region. Beyond Halton Region itself, there are further economic benefits accruing across the Province of Ontario. Clearly, Conservation Halton is a significant presence providing economic benefit to the community.

Beyond these positive economic impacts, Conservation Halton provides a valuable service to the community in terms of ‘ecosystem services’ – the impact of the forest and wetlands maintained by the Conservation Halton in terms of filtering and cleaning water and air. Ecosystem valuation quantifies the cost of providing these services commercially as opposed to having conservation authority lands provide these benefits ‘for free’. The estimated savings to society from these services provided by Conservation Halton’s holdings are nearly \$16 million annually.

Conservation Halton parks provide a growing population with access to abundant, natural green space for leisure and recreation. More specifically, these spaces offer opportunities for recreation that promotes healthy living through physical activity and exercise. By keeping costs low, Conservation Halton conservation areas strive to offer accessibility to all residents while supporting culturally and socioeconomically diverse communities. In addition to local residents, as significant regional destinations, the conservation areas also attract tourists to the area. Conservation Halton adds to the quality of life, which is an economic asset. The availability of Conservation Halton spaces, programs and services adds considerably to the perceived quality of life in Halton Region. This in turn can be extremely valuable in attracting the highly mobile ‘creative class,’ those individuals most likely to create businesses, invest in the community and bring new ideas and energies into the region. Thus, indirectly, Conservation Halton operations add to the attractiveness of the region overall as a place to live and work.

Financial Sustainability Strategy

The master planning process has made it abundantly clear that:

- While the prime focus of the Conservation Halton parks has been and will continue to be protection and enhancement of the natural heritage resources, it is also imperative that there be consideration for the social and economic components of the sustainability model;

- As growth in visitation inevitably increases, so too must the investment in infrastructure, amenities, related facilities and the visitor impact management that is required to protect and enhance the natural heritage features and thereby achieve and maintain the necessary balance between protection and usage;
- Protection of natural heritage resources requires key investments in:
 - Enhancements to existing facilities, infrastructure and amenities;
 - New facilities: educational, recreational and interpretive;
 - Protection and enhancement initiatives: visitor impact management, restoration, etc.

There should be an annual base level of financial support should be sourced through Halton Region (the Province of Ontario and / or Municipalities, etc.) as the main recipient(s) of the benefits provided by this conservation area. This should result from (and possibly be correlated with) the significant population growth occurring in the region, which by itself will place a heavier demand upon usage of Conservation Halton's areas and facilities. This will require a new and different business model to be developed for Conservation Halton, one that acknowledges the significant economic benefits conferred upon Halton Region by Conservation Halton, and that recognizes the pressures placed upon Conservation Halton by population growth.

Consequences of not providing adequate on-going capital funding may include the need to implement one or more of the following actions:

- Raise admission fees at specific conservation areas;
- Raise membership fees;
- Charge differentially at peak times;
- Limit visitation;
- Limit access to certain conservation areas;
- Cut back on some of the programs and services currently offered;
- Cutback the proposed capital development program or extend it beyond the projected 10-year timeframe with subsequent increases in cost.

It is likely that even with capital infusion, some combination of the above factors will be necessary. On-going monitoring of the progress of the master plan implementation should be addressed through adoption of an annual reporting procedure that identifies key projects and tasks including existing initiatives, new initiatives and assessment of overall progress relative to established targets. Conservation Halton creates valuable environmental, social and economic benefits, and provides significant value-added services to Halton Region. To enable Conservation Halton to continue to provide these benefits (and indeed, to increase the value of these benefits to the region), on-going investment in Conservation Halton's conservation area facilities and programs will be required.