

Section III – Items for the Information of the Board

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Directors
Meeting #7/20, Friday, October 23, 2020

FROM: Richard Ubbens, Director, Parks and Culture

RE: **OFF-SEASON OPENING AND PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES**

KEY ISSUE

Summary of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's (TRCA) current winter off-season public operations and potential opportunities for extending operations in the future.

RECOMMENDATION

WHEREAS the TRCA Board of Directors at its meeting on September 25, 2020 requested that staff report back at the next meeting of the Board of Directors on conservation parks and areas winter off-season opening and programming opportunities;

IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT this report be received.

BACKGROUND

At the TRCA Board of Directors Meeting #6/20, held on September 25, 2020, Resolution #A121/20 was approved as follows:

THAT above-noted correspondence items 7.1 – 7.2 be received;

AND FURTHER THAT Toronto and Region Conservation Authority staff report back at the next meeting of the Board of Directors on opportunities to implement an affordable Conservation Parks seniors' membership, and on conservation parks and areas winter off-season opening and programming opportunities.

TRCA received correspondence from a Conservation Parks Member to reconsider conservation park operating dates and extend them into the winter months.

TRCA operates seven conservation parks: Albion Hills, Boyd, Bruce's Mill, Claireville, Glen Haffy, Heart Lake, and Petticoat Creek, along with Tommy Thompson Park in Toronto. With the exception of Albion Hills, conservation parks are closed during the winter months due to resource limitations within the current seasonal operating model which depends heavily on employment of seasonal contract staff.

Albion Hills is TRCA's only conservation park that operates year-round. After seasonal contracts finish, remaining full-time staff work at Albion Hills to operate winter programs, including cross-country skiing, fat biking, and snowshoeing. They are also still required to complete mandatory winter monitoring and inspections when the parks are closed to ensure that buildings and infrastructure are secure, and any identified hazards are corrected during the late fall and winter season.

Although other parks are closed to vehicular access, there are secondary, non-vehicular access points that can be used year-round to enter the parks for passive park and trail enjoyment including walking, hiking, snowshoeing, and bird watching. Most buildings located within the

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parks are not winterized to support visitor use in freezing conditions. Current infrastructure requires water lines and washrooms be winterized to prevent damage. Upgrading buildings to support winter use requires substantive upgrades.

In addition to the trails found in conservation parks, there are hundreds of kilometers of trails across TRCA's passive conservation lands that are open year-round. Many of these trails are multi-use and can accommodate walking, hiking, trail running, cycling, mountain biking, fat biking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Beyond the trails and parking areas, there are no visitor amenities at the passive conservation lands.

TRCA trail head signs at the conservation parks and lands identify that the trails are not winter maintained and that visitors enter the property at their own risk and bear full responsibility for their own safety. Albion Hills is the only exception as winter trail grooming for cross country skiing takes place. While most trail head parking lots on these lands receive no winter clearing, some are cleared of snow through arrangements with the local lower tier municipalities. TRCA staff perform intermittent inspections and clean ups of these lots throughout the year to ensure that they are in good working order.

Trail groups, such as the Bruce Trail Club and Oak Ridges Trail Association, run regular winter hiking, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing excursions on TRCA trails throughout the year. Where TRCA has an agreement with a trail organization, these groups are also responsible for regular inspections and performing basic maintenance year-round. This relieves pressure on TRCA budgets for such activities and encourages a sense of stewardship for the trail users and local community members. For example, volunteers in the Duffins Headwaters contributed 602 hours of volunteer labour for trail maintenance along 165 km of trails in 2019, ensuring that the trails were kept in a state of good repair and open for use. TRCA staff are always looking for opportunities to work with partners to increase enjoyment and use of conservation lands and parks.

RATIONALE

For TRCA parks and lands to remain open year-round or for an extended season, operating standards must be met to ensure that grounds and amenities for visitors are safe for their use and enjoyment. This would require daily inspection and associated maintenance of trails, roads, and parking lots, while building facilities would require redesign and construction to enable year-round use. The equipment and staffing required for regular maintenance as well as the winterization of current infrastructure for washrooms and respite areas is a very significant additional expense within current park operating models. As such, TRCA Conservation Parks has focused efforts at Albion Hills, where there are winterized facilities and infrastructure to support off-season programs. At the same time, TRCA is constantly looking for partners to develop uses that would enable investment in our infrastructure and extended use of parks to support public demand.

Furthermore, TRCA operates five learning attractions and education centres that provide family and school programming throughout the year at Black Creek Pioneer Village, the Kortright Centre for Conservation, Lake St. George and Albion Hills Field Centres and Claremont Nature Centre. Programming at these attractions and centres is tailored to the season and local interests.

In addition to the foregoing, TRCA offers various enhanced winter programming including the Maple Syrup Festival at Kortright Centre for Conservation (Kortright) and Bruce's Mill, Magical Christmas Forest at Kortright, Christmas by Lamplight and Storytime with Santa at Black Creek

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Pioneer Village (Black Creek), March Break educational programs at Kortright, Black Creek, and field centres, and much more.

Relationship to Building the Living City, the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan

This report supports the following strategy set forth in the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan:

Strategy 7 – Build partnerships and new business models

DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE

As surrounding communities continue to expand, demand for accessible greenspace has increased. Recognizing that seasonal conditions have transformed significantly, and mild temperatures are often expected in late October and early November, some assets may be able to remain open. As such, Conservation Parks will pilot extending seasonal operations at Bruce's Mill and Heart Lake on weekends only until October 31, weather permitting. If inclement weather, such as significant frost and/or snow occurs, staff will be required to close gates to prevent access as the resources for the required maintenance to ensure the health and safety of visitors are not available at this time.

Additionally, TRCA Education and Training team continues to develop and identify opportunities to provide enhanced winter programming both in TRCA conservation parks and greenspace as a means to engage local communities and families in natural science and conservation activities. To this end, TRCA continues to update and enhance program and event offerings listed on the trca.ca webpage, providing improved opportunities for watershed residents to find locally relevant activities in all seasons.

TRCA staff are and will continue to explore future partnerships and opportunities to potentially extend the operating seasons across Conservation parks and lands.

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Date: October 14, 2020