

Section III – Items for the Information of the Board

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Directors
Friday, April 30, 2021 Meeting

FROM: Darryl Gray, Director, Education and Training

RE: **EDUCATION PROGRAM EXPANSION TO CLAIREVILLE CONSERVATION AREA**
Strategic Business Planning Policy Statement of Interest

KEY ISSUE

To provide information to the Board of Directors regarding a planned initiative to expand Kortright programming including The Nature School, Summer Camp and Family programs to Claireville Conservation Area through the use of the vacant former Etobicoke Field Studies Centre.

RECOMMENDATION

IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT the Strategic Business Planning Policy Statement of Interest report outlining the expansion of education programs to the Claireville Conservation Area be received.

BACKGROUND

In accordance with Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's (TRCA) Strategic Business Planning (SBP) Policy, all potential new projects/programs or proposed modifications to existing initiatives must proceed through the SBP Policy workflow, including reporting to the Board of Directors for informational purposes.

Since 1957, TRCA has been a leader in developing and delivering outdoor environmental and cultural education programming in the Province of Ontario. Through a diverse suite of program offerings including day, over-night, and in-school learning activities delivered at five education centres, along with schools and natural spaces across the Toronto region, TRCA provides educational programs for over 155,000 students and young learners every year.

At Board of Directors Meeting #12/17 held on March 24, 2017, RES.#A29/17 was approved in part as follows:

WHEREAS Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) has developed and delivered environmental education programs across the Toronto region since 1953;

AND WHEREAS at Authority Meeting #10/15, held on November 27, 2015, amended Resolution #A227/15 endorsed the Community Learning and Engagement Model, with an emphasis on expanding nature-based learning programs and services at TRCA education centres;

THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT TRCA establish and operate The Nature School at Kortright as a private school providing curriculum-linked nature-based learning programs for the 2017/2018 school year.

Item 8.5

Since the launch of The Nature School at Kortright in 2017, public interest in this stream of programming has been steadily increasing with the addition of three new nature school programs, including the Nature School weekend program, Nature School Preschool, and Nature School Primary Nature School. Over that period the Kortright Centre has seen a participant number increase of 90% with a large influx of interest in nature-based programs since September 2020.

In addition to the growth of The Nature School, the Kortright Centre has seen a significant growth in summer camp participant numbers. 2012 saw 62 campers per summer. That number grew to 364 participants in 2013, increased to 524 campers in 2014 and grew to over 700 participants in 2015. Prior to COVID-19, the summer nature day camp at Kortright hosted over 1,600 campers per summer. This growth is attributed to a redesign of camp program offerings, increased marketing efforts and improving staff training and the quality of camp programming delivered as heard through participant feedback.

RATIONALE

To continue to expand on the progressive complement of learning programs and activities offered at TRCA learning centres, TRCA is proposing to establish and operate a second nature-based private school starting for the 2021/2022 school year, acting as a satellite campus to The Nature School at Kortright. The 2021/2022 school year of The Nature School at Claireville will provide enrollment opportunities for students ranging from Kindergarten to Grade Three with students placed in multi-age grades that meet a 1:10 teacher to student ratio, allowing students to establish deeper connections with their teacher and peers and allow for enhanced learning opportunities. This full-time Ministry of Education certified private school will operate from September to June from 9:00 am – 3:00 pm and have an initial capacity for student enrollment of up to 30 students growing its capacity to 80 students in 2026. This school will integrate the Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum into a nature- and forest-school based learning environment; in essence, the outdoors become the classroom within which the normal curriculum is taught.

TRCA teachers at The Nature School at Claireville will be Ontario Certified Teachers (OCT) and hold one or more professional designations including: Forest School Practitioner, Early Childhood Educator or Outdoor Experiential Educator. While The Nature School will operate outdoors in most weather conditions, in the event of severe weather, a private indoor learning environment is available in the Etobicoke Field Studies Centre.

Nature schools, also referred to as forest schools, are a well-established feature of educational practice in Europe, however, are an emerging educational approach in Ontario and Canada. Nature schools, at their core, re-conceptualize the traditional classroom, essentially turning it inside-out, where the majority of the learning takes place in the outdoors. While formats vary, a key precept of this model is that students spend a large percentage of their time learning outside in all types of weather. In a nature school the learning is child-focused and inquiry-based, with a heavy focus on exploration, imagination and creative thinking. Some of the benefits attributed to the forest school approach include:

- increased confidence, self-esteem and independence;
- increased drive to experience new challenges and an improved ability to assess risk;
- improved social development and collaboration;
- increased participation and language development through the introduction of relevant, real-time learning opportunities;

Item 8.5

- increased whole-family engagement;
- child-centred learning.

Section 5 of TRCA's 2013 – 2022 10 Year Strategic Plan Building The Living City focuses on the need to Foster Sustainable Citizenship through a wide range of engagement and learning mechanisms. The Nature School at Claireville will advance TRCA's strategic goals related to creating a sustainable city region by facilitating an improved understanding of environmental, sustainable and urban issues within a targeted segment of our population.

Claireville Conservation Area consists of 848 hectares of natural and forested area that is located in Peel Region adjacent to the City of Toronto and York Region. Special features of this site include a natural landscape which boasts wetlands, valleys, forests, grasslands and the west branch of the Humber River and its tributaries. The property size, well established existing and newly constructed trail systems, and diverse ecosystem and habitat types including 523 different flora species and 59 Fauna species of regional concern will allow for immense programming opportunities and educational program potential.

Other special features at Claireville Conservation Area include an existing vacant building (previously the Etobicoke Field Studies Centre) which was specifically constructed for the purpose of outdoor education programming. This building will be utilized as a private indoor learning space in the event of severe weather and for seat work activities that will be required as The Nature School expands to include higher grade levels.

A large portion of the Claireville Conservation area is within the City of Brampton and according to Statistics Canada (2016) 20.3% of the population in Brampton are children aged 0-14. Furthermore, a population estimate conducted by Peel Region (2016) demonstrates there will be approximately a 10% population increase in Brampton from 2021 to 2026. Claireville Conservation Area is also relatively close to the City of Vaughan, which is expected to grow more than 24% in the next 10 years . According to Stats Canada (2016) 18.8% of the population in the City of Vaughan are children aged 0-14.

With the recent vacancy of the purpose-built Etobicoke Field Studies Centre at Claireville Conservation Area, coupled with the increased interest of The Nature School at Kortright and TRCA's nature-based programs and services it is a logical time to expand these programs to an additional site. This expansion will utilize existing innovative program models that have a proven track record for high client uptake, client satisfaction and retention. Public interest related to outdoor programming and activities is at an all-time high and the population density surrounding Claireville Conservation Area, along with future growth projections, provides a strong rationale for this undertaking.

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

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

Strategy 3 – Rethink greenspace to maximize its value

Strategy 5 – Foster sustainable citizenship

Strategy 7 – Build partnerships and new business models

FINANCIAL DETAILS

The revenue model for The Nature School at Claireville is based on existing and projected user-based fees in accordance with TRCA's 2021 Fee Schedule Public Facilities and Programs.

A list of relevant user fees for this program can be found in TRCA's 2021 Fee schedule:

Item 29.1 – TRCA led Day Camper, for a week of summer camp

Item 8.5

Item 29.8 – Nature School Program, per participant

Item 29.9 – Little Saplings Parent and Tot program.

It is anticipated that The Nature School at Claireville will generate an operating surplus by Year 4 (2024), thereafter contributing to ongoing TRCA financial sustainability and generating new opportunities for continued program investment. The planned deficit in the first 3 years of operations will offset the planned operating revenue, at which time the program will generate a surplus moving forward. The programs are anticipated to net an average of \$100,000 annually following the start-up phase (2021-2025).

Table 1 – Annual Operating Budget

Year	Revenue (\$)	Expenditure (\$)	Net (\$)
2021	113,520	132,807	(19,287)
2022	230,370	267,147	(36,777)
2023	293,620	314,703	(21,083)
2024	367,080	353,955	13,125
2025	438,080	389,715	48,365
2026	529,080	423,275	90,148

DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE

Under Section 16 of the *Education Act*, organizations intending to operate a private school must file a Notice of Intention to Operate a Private School with the Ontario Ministry of Education. For the 2021/2022 school year, TRCA must file the Notice of Intention by September 1, 2021.

Registration for TRCA's existing summer camps is currently live on the TRCA website. Pending no issues with this report, TRCA staff will integrate the summer program offerings into the current suite of offerings and booking system.

The Strategic Business Planning and Performance business unit regularly reviews and audits the financial progress of various programs. Education staff will continue to work with SBPP to monitor the financial sustainability of the program through implementation.

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