SUBJECT: Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy (Hamilton, Dundas and Flamborough) (PED08009) (Wards 1, 13 & 15)

RECOMMENDATION:

(a) That Report PED08009, respecting the “Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy”, be received for information.

(b) That staff’s continued participation in the “Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy” be endorsed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The “Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy” is a collaborative project led by the Royal Botanical Gardens which will result in a comprehensive land management strategy for the ecologically sensitive lands from the former Town of Dundas, in the City of Hamilton, to Brant Street in the City of Burlington, and from Cootes Paradise Marsh to the Niagara Escarpment. The natural areas are recognized for their important natural features, vistas, and have a long cultural history.
Used by many people for hiking and nature appreciation, it is anticipated that with future growth in the Hamilton and Burlington area, many more people will want to use these areas. At the same time, the long-term health of the natural areas is potentially threatened by physical changes that come with urban development.

A Steering Committee for the project has been formed and includes the Royal Botanical Gardens, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, Halton Region, Hamilton Naturalists' Club, Bruce Trail Conservancy and the Bay Area Implementation Team (which implements the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan). Since the City of Hamilton holds land in the study area and has an interest in its appropriate care and protection, staff is participating on the Steering Committee and is providing in kind resources (data, mapping, editing documents, project guidance) to support the project.

With $185,000.00 in funding from the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, the Royal Botanical Gardens and their partner agencies (consisting of the Steering Committee members listed above) have started to develop a conservation and land management strategy that will identify issues affecting this significant part of the Greenbelt Plan area. The Strategy will also set out a series of actions and establish a timetable for the completion of action items that will protect the natural features and ensure that future public facilities and activities on these public lands are sustainable.

Although the natural lands within the study area are under the protection of various plans, including the Provincial Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, Provincial Policy Statement, Parkway Belt West Plan, Natural Heritage Systems identified in municipal Official Plans, and the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan, they do not provide a strategy for land management, stewardship, and acquisition. The Strategy will not be a land use plan or a legally binding document. Instead, it will be a comprehensive management plan for the area, providing recommendations that public and non-profit organization landowners can voluntarily undertake to reduce the impacts of adjacent human activities (such as recreation and land use changes) on the natural heritage features on their properties.

**BACKGROUND:**

**General Project Description**

The Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG), in cooperation with a number of public and non-profit organizations with an interest in conserving natural heritage features, is preparing a strategy that will provide direction for the future use, management, protection, and enhancement of the natural lands from Cootes Paradise to the Niagara Escarpment. This project is known as the “Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy”. This Strategy will focus on the conservation and management of the approximately 1,600 hectares (3,900 acres) of natural lands owned by various public and non-profit organizations to ensure the long term health of the natural system.
The study area is generally delineated in the west from the former Town of Dundas (Sydenham Road to Osler Drive), south to Main Street and Cootes Paradise in Hamilton, east to Brant Street in the City of Burlington, and north to Dundas Street/Highway No. 5 in Waterdown (see map in Appendix “A”). The area includes natural areas such as the Niagara Escarpment and Cootes Paradise and other open space lands within the urban areas in Dundas, Hamilton, and Waterdown.

Who is Involved in the Project?

The “Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy” is a collaborative project of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, Halton Region, Hamilton Naturalists’ Club, Bruce Trail Conservancy and the Bay Area Implementation Team (which implements the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan). Through the development of this protection strategy, this project supports the overall goals of these organizations to conserve natural lands, to provide recreation facilities, support sustainable communities, and educate the public about the natural environment.

The origins of this Strategy were developed at a staff level in 2004 during discussions with the project partners. The Strategy will be guided by a Steering Committee consisting of key public and non-profit organization landowners in the study area (Royal Botanical Gardens, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, City of Burlington, City of Hamilton, Halton Region, Hamilton Naturalists’ Club, and the Bruce Trail Conservancy). To date, the Steering Committee has been responsible for preparing the work plan and budget, securing funding, and hiring a Project Manager. The Committee will also finalize the Strategy and secure approval of their respective Boards (for non-profit organizations and Conservation Authority members) or Councils (for municipal members).

Funding and other Resources Required

In the spring of 2007, the Royal Botanical Gardens received $185,000.00 in funding (over two years) from the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, a not-for-profit organization established in 2005 by the Province of Ontario. The Foundation supports activities that promote and sustain the lands within the Provincial Greenbelt Plan “as a beneficial, valuable and permanent feature, enhancing the life of all Ontarians”. Ontario’s Greenbelt is an area of permanently protected green space, farmland, vibrant communities, forests, wetlands, and watersheds. A vision for the Greenbelt is to protect key environmentally sensitive land and farmlands from urban development and support activities associated with tourism, recreation and agriculture. The project funding is being used to hire a Project Manager and to cover costs of printing, mailing distributions, open houses and workshops.
In addition to this, the project partners are contributing in kind resources valued at $116,640.00 over the two-year course of the project. The City of Hamilton is providing in kind contributions including one representative from the Community Planning and Design Section to sit on the Steering Committee and to provide resources, including mapping, data, and staff time to review reports, and attend meetings, open houses, and workshops.

ANALYSIS/RATIONALE:

Scope of the Project

The study area, which is located in the west end of Hamilton, near the boundary between the Cities of Hamilton and Burlington, is a complex of some of the botanically richest lands in Canada. The significance of these lands results in part from their geography. Situated at the western end of Lake Ontario, and sheltered by the south-facing slope of the Niagara Escarpment, the lands benefit from the effect of a sheltered microclimate. The natural areas provide habitat for many important bird, reptile, amphibian, fish, and insect species. The area is of particular importance because many natural areas are connected, providing an ecological corridor along which wildlife and plants can move. The Cootes Paradise Marsh and Grindstone Creek estuary connect this ecological unit with Hamilton Harbour and Lake Ontario.

As part of the Greenbelt Plan lands surrounding the Greater Golden Horseshoe, these biologically diverse, internationally recognized natural lands will invariably be affected by physical changes to the surrounding lands and waters that will result from development. Due to increasing urban pressure on this unique area, the need for a coordinated management strategy for these lands has been identified. The natural areas will potentially be subject to increased use for recreation and environmental education as the population grows over the next two decades. In anticipation of this urban growth, a conservation and land management strategy is critical to balance social, environmental, and economic interests to protect and enhance these properties into the future. A sound Strategy will provide protection and direction for the use of significant natural lands and promote a vision and plan of action for providing permanent protection of additional significant natural lands in the area. It will also create a system of linked natural areas and public recreational and educational activities that will be ecologically viable in the long term. The Strategy will consider aspects such as access to the natural system, protection of special habitat, land acquisition and land trusts, and public facilities.

These public lands are currently affected by various legislation and plans, including the Provincial Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, Provincial Policy Statement, Parkway Belt West Plan, Natural Heritage Systems identified in municipal Official Plans, and the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan. Although these plans, legislation and policies provide protection to many of the lands in the study area, they do not provide a strategy for land management, stewardship, and acquisition. The Strategy will not be a
land use plan or a legally binding document. The Strategy will be a comprehensive management plan for the area, providing recommendations that public and non-profit organizations can voluntarily undertake to reduce the impacts of adjacent human activities (such as recreation, land use changes) on the natural heritage features on their properties.

Process

The preparation of the Strategy is divided into two phases. Phase 1 involves preparing a Background Report which will document the physical, social, and economic characteristics of the area. It is intended to provide a starting point for developing a management strategy and will be completed at the end of December 2007. The Background Report will be presented to the public and potential stakeholders at an Open House in January 2008.

The Strategy will employ a community-based planning approach that will allow those who have the most at stake to work together towards a common vision. As part of this, in Phase 2, a Project Advisory Committee (PAC) will be formed that includes representatives from local citizens, non-government interest groups, and municipal, provincial, and federal agencies. Stakeholders will include: elected officials, landowners, agency staff, volunteers, environment and recreation interest groups and agencies, and those who use public lands.

The PAC will provide guidance on what is to be included in the Strategy, including identifying issues, establishing a vision, and developing land management recommendations. The Phase 2 Strategy will be presented to the public for review and comment. It is vital to the success of this project that all stakeholders and landowners are engaged in the process, educated about the issues, and reach consensus on the strategy to be used.

When the Strategy is completed (April 2009), all members of the Steering Committee will report to their respective Councils (in the case of municipalities) and Boards (in the case of non-profit organizations and Conservation Authorities). At this time, staff will present the Strategy to the Economic Development and Planning Committee for review and approval.

Project Goals

The goals of the project are to:

1. Create community awareness of the issues surrounding the protection of natural lands within the study area;
2. Develop a strategy for the management of these lands that will protect and enhance the long-term health of the natural system while balancing the need for recreation and nature appreciation within the community;

3. Develop management policies for the study area, including: coordinated practices for each participating landowner or management agency, strategies for planning and protecting important land areas, facilities to be developed and preliminary cost-estimates, and actions to protect and link key natural unprotected areas; and,

4. Develop a five-to-seven year implementation plan and timeline for each partner.

Anticipated Benefits Resulting from the Strategy

Once complete, the “Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy” will provide:

- A clear, coordinated land management implementation plan, which will promote greater efficiency through cooperation, sharing of resources, and volunteer involvement;

- An understanding of the needs and priorities for future land securement and landowner stewardship actions to protect the natural heritage values of the study area and enhance essential ecological linkages;

- Stronger and more sustainable protection for species at risk and sensitive ecological communities;

- Public education about the natural significance of the landscape and the opportunities it presents for nature appreciation, recreation and education;

- Better communication with local residents and landowners through the development and implementation of the Strategy Report, thereby reducing the potential for land use conflicts;

- More effective mechanisms to control unauthorized access and reduce negative environmental impacts to protected natural areas and improve public safety;

- Increased opportunities for environmental education and research;

- Better management of trails systems; and,

- Long-term protection of important headwater areas, supporting healthy streams and improved water quality in Cootes Paradise and Hamilton Harbour.
Work Plan Summary

The Steering Committee has outlined a Work Plan which includes the following milestones:

**Phase 1: Background Report**

From July to December 2007, the Steering Committee and the Project Manager worked to complete the Phase 1 Background Report, which describes the existing conditions (land uses, natural features and functions) and legislation and policies within the study area. The Background Report will have been completed and approved by the Steering Committee by the end of December 2007.

**Phase 2: Preparing the Strategy**

On completion of the Phase 1 report, a public Open House will be held to inform the public of the process for developing the Conservation and Land Management Strategy. Other related activities and milestones are noted below:

- **January 16, 2008**  Open House to introduce study to public.
- **January 2008**  Assemble the Project Advisory Committee and have first meeting.
- **January-July, 2008**  Project Advisory Committee meetings to develop Strategy.
- **July-December, 2008**  Steering Committee to prepare draft Strategy based on input and review with Stakeholder Committee.
- **January 2009**  Public Open House to present proposed Cootes to Escarpment Land Management Strategy.
- **April 2009**  Approval of Strategy by Steering Committee.
- **June 2009**  Final document approved by Boards of private partner organizations and Councils of public government partners.

**ALTERNATIVES FOR CONSIDERATION:**

If the continued involvement of staff on the Steering Committee and providing in kind resources in the Cootes to Escarpment Conservation and Land Management Strategy is not approved, the City of Hamilton will not be able to guide and provide input into the Strategy.
As much of the study area is within City of Hamilton boundaries, and the City has an interest as a landowner and a public body in maintaining and enhancing significant natural areas within the municipality, it is recommended that staff continue to participate in the development of the Strategy.

**FINANCIAL/STAFFING/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:**

To date, the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation have provided funding for the project. The City of Hamilton has been asked to provide in-kind resources, which has included staff time to attend Steering Committee meetings and to provide text, data, mapping, and editing for the Background Report. In the future, staff will be asked to attend the Open Houses and meetings to develop the Strategy, continue to attend Steering Committee meetings, provide data, and review the Strategy report. Continued staff participation can be accommodated within the existing work program.

There are no legal implications to the City of Hamilton in preparing the Strategy.

**POLICIES AFFECTING PROPOSAL:**

The publicly and quasi-publicly owned natural lands are currently affected by various statutes, provincial policies, and associated plans, including the Provincial Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, Provincial Policy Statement, Parkway Belt West Plan, Natural Heritage Systems identified in municipal Official Plans, and the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan.

The Strategy will contain recommendations for land management that affected landowners can voluntarily implement and will not be a legally binding document. It is anticipated that there will be no conflict with any existing policies, plans, or legislation currently in effect in the study area.

**RELEVANT CONSULTATION:**

Staff in the Open Space Development Section (Capital Planning and Implementation Division, Public Works Department) has attended past Steering Committee meetings. Also, staff from external agencies were consulted, including the Royal Botanical Gardens, Conservation Halton, Hamilton Conservation Authority, Hamilton Naturalists' Club, the Region of Halton, the City of Burlington, the Bruce Trail Conservancy, and the Bay Area Implementation Team (which implement the Hamilton Harbour Remedial Action Plan).
CITY STRATEGIC COMMITMENT:

By evaluating the “Triple Bottom Line”, (community, environment, economic implications) we can make choices that create value across all three bottom lines, moving us closer to our vision for a sustainable community, and Provincial interests.

Community Well-Being is enhanced. ☑ Yes ☐ No
Opportunities for physical activity are supported and enhanced.

Environmental Well-Being is enhanced. ☑ Yes ☐ No
Ecological function and the natural heritage system are protected.

Economic Well-Being is enhanced. ☑ Yes ☐ No
Hamilton’s high-quality environmental amenities are maintained and enhanced.

Does the option you are recommending create value across all three bottom lines? ☑ Yes ☐ No
It satisfies community, environmental and economic well-being.

Do the options you are recommending make Hamilton a City of choice for high performance public servants? ☑ Yes ☐ No
It illustrates the City’s continuing commitment to partnering with other agencies and governments and promoting strategic planning.

:CP
Attach. (1)