

Grand River Conservation Authority

Report number: GM-10-23-76

Date: October 27, 2023

To: Members of the Grand River Conservation Authority

Subject: Outdoor Environmental Education Program Review

Recommendation:

THAT the Grand River Conservation Authority endorse the proposed actions and transition plan outlined within this report to move its Outdoor Environmental Education Program towards a breakeven business model that does not rely on municipal apportionment (levy);

AND THAT staff report back to the board at minimum on an annual basis on progress made.

Summary:

The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) has been providing Outdoor Environmental Education programming since the 1970s. A thorough review of the GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education program has been conducted by staff, which was driven by the changes to the way this program can be funded, and the significant change to operations that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program review considered all aspects of the Outdoor Environmental Education Program, with the primary objective of developing a breakeven business model that no longer relies on municipal apportionment.

Based on the program review, staff have identified a number of key recommendations to help achieve the desired objectives, which include the recommendation that the program be transitioned to operate from within the GRCA's Conservation Areas, the hybrid program delivery model be expanded, and that the current staffing model primarily support the delivery of the school component of the program, while enhancing support for day-to-day operations.

Report:

The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) has been providing Outdoor Environmental Education programming since the 1970s. This program was created through partnerships with watershed school boards to create curriculum-based programs to help educators get students outdoors and engaged in hands-on environmental learning. The program was designed to engage and connect watershed residents with the GRCA, and to help educate, raise awareness and gain the support of residents for all the work that the GRCA does in the watershed. Creating positive working relationships with school boards and associations with watershed residents, municipal partners, community groups and other organizations has and continues to create social credit and support for the GRCA and its work as a water management agency. The Outdoor Environmental Education program has evolved over the years, and at times, has provided community programming, birthday parties, day camps and participated in community events, in addition to the main school program component.

A thorough review of the GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education program has been conducted by staff, which was driven by two factors:

1. the changes to the Conservation Authorities Act; and
2. the significant change to operations that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The changes to the Conservation Authorities Act have impacted how this program can be funded. As a Category 3 program, it is required to operate without any municipal funding, unless a cost-apportioning agreement with municipalities is in place. The direction provided by the Ad-Hoc Conservation Authorities Act Committee to staff was that this program should be self-

funded and achieve breakeven results. The funding approach that was endorsed by the General Membership is that funds from the transition reserve will be used as a funding source to augment program revenue and achieve breakeven during a transition period.

Another significant change impacting the Outdoor Education Program occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The entire program was paused in March 2020. In January 2021, the school program slowly restarted with virtual and limited at-school outdoor program delivery. While the program has since resumed in-person delivery to school classes, many of the other programs that were offered pre-pandemic (e.g., day camps, Conservation Area and community group programs) have not resumed or have been limited. This decision was driven by resource limitations and the priority focus on the school board agreements as the foundation of the outdoor environmental education program, as well as the need to complete the Outdoor Education Program Review. Evaluating the programs at a time when they were not operating also minimized any potential negative impacts that may have resulted from decisions made.

The program review considered all aspects of the Outdoor Environmental Education Program including program delivery, facilities, staffing, revenue and operating costs. The objectives of the review were defined as:

- Confirm the program's alignment with the GRCA's future strategic direction;
- Develop a breakeven business model; and
- Recommend opportunities for the improvement of the program, including opportunities to foster greater alignment and synergies with other GRCA programs and service areas.

Program Delivery

For many years, the GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education Program has provided a variety of offerings including program delivery with school boards, additional programs booked individually by schools, community programming (e.g., Girl Guides, Scouts, etc.), birthday parties and day camps.

As noted, the Outdoor Environmental Education program was paused in March 2020 at the start of the pandemic and slowly restarted beginning in early 2021 with online virtual and limited at-school program delivery. This delivery model of the school program was utilized until September 2022 when the nature centres reopened for in-person programs.

This shift in operations during the pandemic to focus on school board agreements has continued post-pandemic. Currently, the GRCA remains focused on delivering programs through agreements with the school boards, although some individual school classes outside of the agreements and some community group programs are being facilitated. This decision was largely driven by resource limitations and the fact that the school board agreements are the core of the program and provide a substantial portion of its funding.

Currently, most classes are delivered through field trips by school groups to the Nature Centres, along with some at-school visits due to increased transportation costs and continued virtual program delivery, although the need and desire for virtual programming has decreased significantly post pandemic. At-school programs are mostly delivered outdoors but can include indoor activities as well. While less so, the virtual programs that were developed through the pandemic are still being delivered as school boards continue to provide equal opportunities for virtual students. The operation of the GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education Program is busiest from Monday to Friday, mid-September to mid-June, as this is when the majority of program delivery occurs.

Nature Centre Facilities

The GRCA currently has five nature centre facilities where school groups attend programs during the school year. These facilities include:

- Apps' Mill Nature Centre, Brantford
- Guelph Lake Nature Centre, Guelph
- Laurel Creek Nature Centre, Waterloo
- Shade's Mills Nature Centre, Cambridge (in Shade's Mills Conservation Area)
- Taquanyah Nature Centre, Cayuga

The first three centres listed above operate throughout the entire school year while Shade's Mills operates for five to six months during the school year, and Taquanyah operates as a seasonal site in the fall and if needed, in the spring. In addition to the GRCA Nature Centres, staff also deliver programs in GRCA Conservation Areas, other GRCA properties, schoolyards and virtually, as well as other locations that complement the curriculum delivery.

Historically, there has been very little capital investment in the nature centre facility infrastructure. All previously required maintenance has been funded with Grand River Conservation Foundation (GRCF) donations, nature centre reserves and special government grants. As a result, the five nature centre buildings and properties require significant investment for maintenance, replacement, and other required upgrades to continue to operate.

In 2022, as part of the program review, site condition assessments for all the nature centre properties were completed by an external consultant, except for the Guelph Lake Nature Centre, since the GRCA is in the process of constructing a new facility within the Guelph Lake Conservation Area. The site conditions assessments looked at all of the infrastructure on the properties, including the buildings and their various components (roof, furnaces, windows, etc.), and structures such as bridges, boardwalks, etc.

The site condition assessments included 20-year cost estimates for each nature centre, e.g., facilities, which are summarized as follows:

Nature Centre	Estimated Cost to Replace in 2022 Dollars	20-year Cost Estimate for Maintenance (2022-2042) in 2022 Dollars
Apps' Mill Nature Centre	\$3,071,600	\$2,024,100
Laurel Creek Nature Centre	\$3,776,000	\$2,416,500
Shade's Mills Nature Centre	\$1,599,000	\$ 303,500
Taquanyah Nature Centre	\$1,737,900	\$ 802,400
Total	\$10,184,500	\$5,546,500
Average Annual Cost		\$ 275,000

Property and capital maintenance costs are not currently incorporated into the annual budgets for the Outdoor Environmental Education program. School boards have indicated that their ability to accommodate further fee increases is not feasible without an increase to their funding for this program from the province. The current fee structure covers the cost of program delivery (staff), equipment and materials. It does not provide any funding for capital and infrastructure costs. The Nature Centre reserve balance for all locations is \$444,632 as at December 31, 2022.

Currently, four of the five nature centres are located outside of the GRCA's Conservation Areas. Apart from Shade's Mills Nature Centre and the future Guelph Lake Nature Centre, to be located within Guelph Lake Conservation Area, the GRCA operates its Outdoor Environmental Education Program from separate properties with dedicated/exclusive use buildings located outside of its fee-for-use Conservation Areas. Historically, this has posed several challenges, including:

- Increased costs to maintain the nature centre properties to support the program and the type of property use associated with the program, such as managing tree risk and security issues, as well as the maintenance of aging buildings and other infrastructure.
- Increased work and competing demands on staff resources related to property maintenance and management as these tasks are currently performed by various staff including Nature Centre, Central Services and Conservation Area employees. The competing demands are compounded by being located outside of conservation areas.
- Security of property, safety and enforcement concerns related to unauthorized uses of the nature centre properties and the more isolated location of these areas.

The existing nature centre buildings range in size from approximately 1,200 ft² (Shade's Mills) to 7,000 ft² (Laurel Creek). As demonstrated through the pandemic, a large indoor facility is not required to operate the Outdoor Environmental Education Program. Students and program participants require access to certain amenities, including washrooms, clean drinking water, warming areas in the winter months, shelter in the event of inclement weather, and accessible spaces where people of all abilities can actively participate in the program. Staff require a workspace with a computer, as well as storage space for program materials.

Staffing

The current staffing complement in the Outdoor Environmental Education program includes 4 full-time staff, 3 seasonal staff, and 11 casual part-time staff. To varying degrees, each of the staff have responsibilities that may include program development, delivery, planning and administrative work with teachers, and facility and property-related tasks. These are all unionized positions.

Since March 2021, these staff have reported directly to the Manager of Strategic Communications and Environmental Education, who also oversees the work and activities of the Strategic Communications Department.

Financial Information

The 2023 operating budget for this program included a \$310,100 allocation of municipal general levy in order to breakeven. This amount of municipal levy funding is reflective of typical levy requirements for this program in the past few years. The other source of revenue is fee revenue from school board agreements and any additional school classes that get booked.

Under the new regulations effective January 1, 2024 this program is considered a Category 3 program and therefore the allocation of municipal funding will cease. As previously endorsed by the General Membership, use of funds from the transition reserve will be allocated to this program during a transition period as the program seeks to achieve a breakeven operating model. The transition period is anticipated to be three to five years, as the proposed actions outlined below are implemented.

As at August 31, the 2023 operating forecast net result is a \$70,000 deficit. Forecast operating costs for 2023 are \$1,048,100 and include staffing, administrative expenses, and facility and grounds maintenance. The 2023 forecast fee revenue from school contracts was increased from \$500,000 to \$600,000 to reflect the outcome of school contracts negotiated for the 2023/2024 school year. Staffing costs were also increased to reflect the increased activity. Nature centre staffing expenses are forecast at \$674,500. The deficit is being driven by increased facility cleaning costs post-COVID. The forecast for 2023 includes capital maintenance and equipment costs of approximately \$60,000, which are funded by a combination of donations from the Grand River Conservation Foundation (GRCF) and use of the nature centre reserves. Historically, capital maintenance expenses for the facilities have been funded with either the nature centre reserves or GRCF donations.

The preliminary 2024 budget includes the use of approximately \$300,000 of the transition reserve. It does not reflect savings from the proposed action plan outlined below at this time.

The recommendations in the proposed action plan are expected to reduce costs over time, but not to the extent required to achieve breakeven results. Additional funding will still be required from either reserves or other external revenue sources. Funding for operating costs could potentially be generated via fundraising activities carried out by the GRCA, which has occurred historically.

Risks and Considerations

There have always been numerous challenges facing the GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education Program. These have included limitations on and uncertainty of school board funding, the increased cost of managing the properties and facilities, increased costs due to aging infrastructure, the increased costs and pressure from other types of property use, i.e., trespassing, unauthorized use, passive use and the increased costs of program delivery.

Proposed Action Plan

Based on the Program Review, staff have identified a number of key recommendations to help achieve the established objectives and address the risks and considerations. The recommendations and proposed next steps include:

1. Transition the Outdoor Environmental Education Program to operate from within the GRCA's Conservation Areas.
 - Develop a transition plan for the relocation of the program that includes anticipated timelines, a plan to rehome the nature centre animals where applicable, and further establishes appropriate infrastructure requirements to support the program.
2. Expand the hybrid program delivery model to further develop existing and new At-School, Virtual, and Outreach programs, to complement the field trips to the GRCA's Conservation Areas.
3. Maintain a staffing model that primarily supports the delivery of the school program, while providing enhanced support for the day-to-day operations for the program.

In addition to the key recommendations listed above, work is already underway to streamline and refine the management and delivery of the program, including updated procedures, training, and information management, and efficiencies will be sought through greater use of technology.

Once the new business model for the program has been implemented and established, opportunities for additional revenue and program offerings, e.g., day camps, Conservation Area programs, virtual programs for the public, etc., may be considered, each with its own financial analysis and business case.

Conclusion

Despite several challenges throughout the program's history, the GRCA has established and maintained its position as a leading provider of outdoor environmental education within the Grand River watershed. Now, more than ever, the importance of providing outdoor environmental education is critical to our vision of a healthy watershed, where we work, live, play and prosper in balance with the natural environment. The GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education Program serves to raise public awareness of the important benefits of conservation and the work of the GRCA.

In consideration of the initial program review objectives, the program continues to be directly aligned with the GRCA's strategic priority 3 to connect people to the environment through outdoor experiences. The recommendations that have been developed are expected to transition the program to a breakeven business model over a period of three to five years, through decreased operating costs and opportunities to achieve operational efficiencies, greater alignment and integration with other GRCA programs and service areas, and the potential for additional revenue and enhanced program offerings.

Financial Implications:

Implementation of the proposed action plan will result in reduced costs over time, thereby helping move the program towards breakeven results. The issue of the aging facilities and future costs still needs to be fully addressed. To determine options for the existing nature centre properties, a more thorough analysis will be required. This process will be led and implemented by the Conservation Lands department. The use of municipal general levy to fund this program ceases at the end of 2023. For 2024, the transition reserve (estimate \$300,000) will be used to achieve breakeven results for the Outdoor Environmental Education Program. Reduced reliance on the transition reserve is contingent on the pace of implementing the recommendations and the realization of actual costs of operating out of the conservation areas.

Other Department Considerations:

Various departments were instrumental in conducting the program review and supported the development of the proposed action plan.

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