

# Grand River Conservation Authority

**Report number:** GM-09-24-78

**Date:** September 27, 2024

**To:** Members of the Grand River Conservation Authority

**Subject:** Update - Outdoor Environmental Education Program Review

---

## Recommendation:

THAT the Grand River Conservation Authority extend the deadline regarding the potential options for the Apps' Mill, Laurel Creek, and Taquanyah nature centres from September 2024 to March 2025 to allow staff to continue discussions with municipalities, school boards and other agencies.

## Summary:

In October 2023, staff brought forward a review of the GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education Program (GRCA Board report GM-11-23-76), which was driven by the changes to how this program can be funded and impacts to the program related to the 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 identified several key recommendations to help achieve the desired objectives. These included the recommendation that the program be transitioned to operate from within the GRCA's fee-for-use conservation areas, the hybrid program delivery model be expanded, and the current staffing model primarily support the delivery of the school component of the program while enhancing support for day-to-day operations. The facility costs were a significant factor in determining the recommendation to transition the program to operate from within the GRCA's fee-for-use conservation areas, along with the opportunity for operational efficiencies and enhanced support for the program.

In November 2023, the GRCA Board received report GM-11-23-76 and referred it back to staff, requesting that further discussion with interested municipalities be continued and additional information regarding the potential options for the Nature Centre facilities and lands be brought back on or before the September 2024 Board meeting.

Currently, the original motion from the October 27, 2023, staff report GM-11-23-76 remains on the floor:

**Motion #23-161** from the General Membership Meeting on October 27, 2023:

**Moved By:** Susan Foxtton

**Seconded By:** John Challinor II

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.

Of the five (5) nature centres, three (3) operate on GRCA lands specifically dedicated to the use of the nature centre: Apps' Mill (Brant County), Laurel Creek (Waterloo), and Taquanyah (Cayuga). Shade's Mills Nature Centre is within Shade's Mills Conservation Area in Cambridge,

and the new Guelph Lake Nature Centre is currently being built within Guelph Lake Conservation Area in Guelph.

In June 2024, staff provided additional information to the GRCA board regarding potential options for the Apps' Mill, Laurel Creek, and Taquanyah nature centres, along with an update on the discussions with municipalities, school boards and other agencies that had occurred until that time. Since then, discussions with these agencies have been ongoing.

## **Report:**

The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) has been providing Outdoor Environmental Education programming since the 1970s. The changes to the Conservation Authorities (CA) Act and new regulations have changed the way that conservation authorities can fund their programs and services. The GRCA's Outdoor Environmental Education Program, as a Category 3 non-mandatory program, is now required to operate without any municipal funding, unless a cost-apportioning agreement with municipalities is in place. Through discussions with the GRCA Board and its Ad-Hoc CA Act Committee over the past few years, the direction provided to GRCA staff was that this program was to be self-funded and achieve breakeven operations.

In consideration of the GRCA board's direction and driven by the changes to the CA Act, as well as the significant change to operations that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, GRCA staff conducted a review of the program. The objectives of the review were to confirm the program's alignment with the GRCA's strategic priorities, develop a breakeven business model, and recommend opportunities for improvement, including greater alignment and synergies with other GRCA program and services areas.

[GRCA Board Report GM-10-23-76 Outdoor Environmental Education Program Review](#) was presented to the GRCA board in October 2023, and provided a summary of the review and its key recommendations, which included that the current staffing model primarily support the delivery of the school component of the program while enhancing support for day-to-day operations, that the hybrid program delivery model (at school in person and virtual options) be expanded to meet the changing needs of school boards and other groups, and that the 'field-trip component' of the program (i.e., to GRCA nature centre properties) be transitioned to operate from within the GRCA's fee-for-use conservation areas.

While the program review considered all aspects of the Outdoor Environmental Education Program; it did not address the future of the current nature centre properties and facilities if the program were to relocate within Grand River Conservation Areas. The report stated that to determine options for the existing properties and buildings, a more thorough analysis would be undertaken by the GRCA Conservation Lands department.

At the November 24, 2023, General Membership Meeting, the GRCA board received the Outdoor Environmental Education Program Review report and referred it back to staff for further consideration, requesting that more information be provided to the GRCA board no later than September 2024.

At the June 28, 2024, General Membership Meeting, the Board was provided with potential options for the three (3) nature centres that operate on lands specifically dedicated to the use of the nature centre, i.e., Apps' Mills, Laurel Creek and Taquanyah nature centres, along with an update on the discussions with municipalities, school boards and other agencies that had occurred until that time. Staff were directed to continue to discuss and negotiate opportunities with municipalities, school boards and other agencies for these three (3) nature centres, and discussions are ongoing.

## **Nature Centre Facilities and Properties**

The GRCA currently has 5 nature centre facilities and properties where school groups attend programs during the school year. These include:

- Apps' Mill Nature Centre, County of Brant
- Guelph Lake Nature Centre, City of Guelph (new facility under construction within Guelph Lake Conservation Area)
- Laurel Creek Nature Centre, City of Waterloo, Region of Waterloo
- Shade's Mills Nature Centre, City of Cambridge (in Shade's Mills Conservation Area), Region of Waterloo
- Taquanyah Nature Centre, Cayuga, Haldimand County

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. 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.

Due to limited funds, there has been very little capital investment in the nature centre facility infrastructure. Required maintenance has been funded with Grand River Conservation Foundation (GRCF) donations, nature centre reserves, and special government grants, as more urgent needs arose. 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 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 condition assessments looked at all 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, as noted in Appendix A.

### **Operating Budget and Capital Maintenance Costs**

The 2023 actual budget for this program included a \$310,100 allocation of municipal general levy to break even. The 2024 budget includes the use of approximately \$312,000 of the transition reserve to break even. Operating costs include program delivery (compensation, benefits, program equipment), administrative (travel, phones, health and safety, office supplies, and computer charges), and facility expenses (utilities, grounds maintenance, cleaning, etc.). Appendix A provides a financial summary of the Outdoor Environmental Education Program, including the 2024 Budget, the 2023 Actual Budget, and a summary of the additional capital maintenance costs. Currently and historically, property and capital maintenance costs have not been incorporated into the annual budgets for the Outdoor Environmental Education Program.

### **Land Use Analysis**

A land use analysis of the three (3) nature centre properties outside of fee-for-use conservation areas was completed. Through this analysis, several options were explored, including:

- Demolition: structures removed from the property, limiting future liability and operational expenses.
- Sever/sell: Ability to/options for disposition of facility and associated lands.
- Municipal Transfer: Transfer of facility, program-associated lands, and/or conservation lands to municipality.
- Lease/Agreements: Options for leasing facilities and associated lands through agreement or for commercial purposes.
- Retain and repurpose the facility and property for alternative use by the GRCA.

The land use analysis of the three nature centres determined that the options to sever, lease the facilities and/or properties for commercial purposes, or enter into other agreements with organizations and companies outside the public sector are very limited, and the facilities cannot be repurposed for alternative use by the GRCA.

For Apps' Mill and Laurel Creek nature centres, GRCA staff have met with municipal and school board staff to examine various options for municipal/school board use. Options for each nature centre may include funding to maintain the GRCA program at the nature centre, transferring the ownership and operation of the facility to a municipality, and leasing the property to both or one of the municipalities/school boards. For the Taquanyah Nature Centre, similar preliminary discussions have started with the school boards, municipality, and Six Nations of the Grand River.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the changes to the Conservation Authorities Act around funding of the program and changes to the operations and program during the pandemic, staff completed a program review with the primary objective of developing a breakeven business model that no longer relies on municipal apportionment.

Site condition assessments of the existing nature centres were completed, and several significant facility improvements are required outside the existing and projected funding. To maximize the available funding and maintain the outdoor education program, staff made several recommendations, including that the program moves from existing facilities on separate GRCA parcels and into the fee-for-use Conservation Areas where shared resources can be utilized. As a result, the GRCA would be left with three facilities with limited land use options.

Considering the long-standing community history and the considerable financial and social investments made by donors and other interest groups in these nature centres, staff would like to continue the discussions and negotiations regarding the opportunities for these facilities and associated lands.

### **Financial Implications:**

The financial implications are contingent on the course of action decided upon.

### **Other Department Considerations:**

Staff from various departments have contributed to the review.

#### **Prepared by:**

Lisa Stocco  
Manager of Strategic Communications  
and Environmental Education

#### **Approved by:**

Samantha Lawson  
Chief Administrative Officer