

Grand River Conservation Authority

Report number: GM-10-24-91

Date: October 25, 2024

To: Members of the Grand River Conservation Authority

Subject: Conservation Areas Strategy

Recommendation:

THAT Report Number GM-10-24-91 – Conservation Areas Strategy be received as information;

AND THAT the Conservation Areas Strategy be approved and posted on the Grand River Conservation Authority website;

AND THAT the GRCA's Human Heritage Policy 2005 (P-03-05-20) be rescinded.

Summary:

The final draft of the Conservation Areas Strategy has been prepared after a six-week consultation period. Based on the feedback received, minor revisions have been made. Once approved, the final Strategy will be available on the GRCA's website.

After reviewing changes to the Conservation Authorities Act and regulations, and developing the Conservation Areas Strategy, GRCA staff recognized that the 2005 Human Heritage Policy should be rescinded. Those elements of the Policy that remain implementable, notably maintenance of the Canadian Heritage River designation, have been incorporated into the Conservation Areas Strategy.

Report:

Ontario Regulation 686/21: Mandatory Programs and Services requires all Conservation Authorities to develop a Conservation Areas Strategy by December 31, 2024. The purpose of the Strategy is to provide an integrated, high-level framework that helps guide, manage, and inform future decision-making for all GRCA-owned and controlled lands.

Ontario Regulation 686/21 requires public and stakeholder consultation on the Strategy in a manner that the conservation authority considers advisable. The Grand River Conservation Authority (GRCA) approved the draft Conservation Areas Strategy (Strategy) at the August 2024 meeting, and directed staff to undertake public consultation with municipalities, First Nations, the public and other interest-holders (see GM-08-24-66). Staff undertook the following activities during a six-week consultation period from August 23rd to October 4th:

- The draft strategy was posted on the GRCA's website.
- Letters were sent to watershed municipalities, Six Nations of the Grand River, and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. By request, staff presented the Strategy to the Township of Wilmot council meeting on September 23rd.
- Two virtual webinars were held on September 10th and September 24th. Six participants attended the first webinar and four attended the second. A recording of the presentation was posted on the GRCA's website.
- A survey was posted on the GRCA's website until October 4th.
- Staff attended the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation's "Caring Together Gathering" community event on September 18th. Staff promoted the Strategy and provided information on the webinar and survey.

- The Strategy, survey and public consultation information was advertised through a press releases and multiple social media posts.

Summary of Feedback

Staff gathered feedback through the online survey, municipal presentations, written comments and two public webinars. Comments were aggregated and are summarized below.

Public webinars:

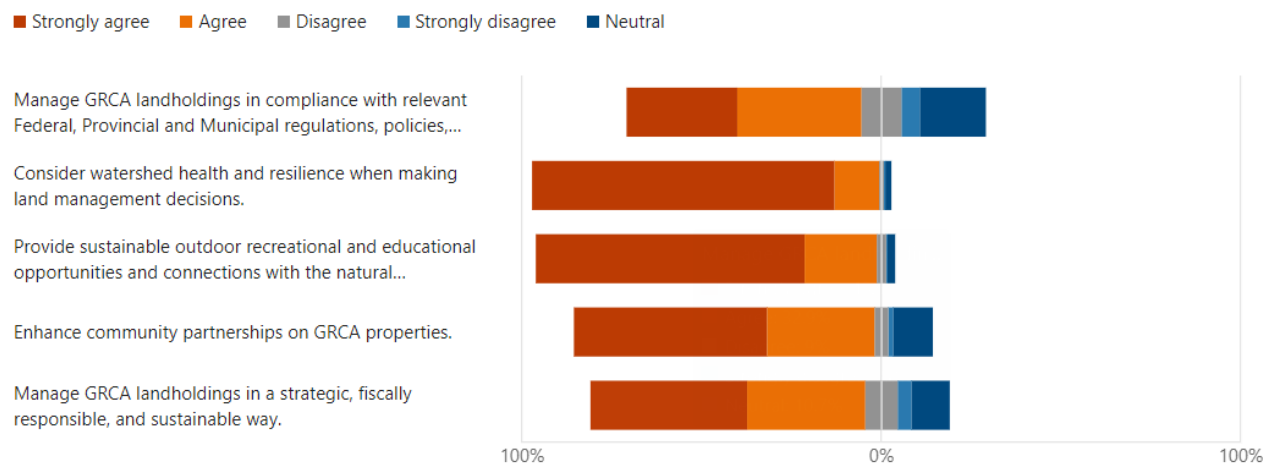
During both webinars, staff delivered a 15-minute presentation on the draft Strategy and was followed by a Q & A session. Questions asked during the two public webinars covered a wide range of topics and answers were provided by Samantha Lawson, Chief Administrative Officer; Pam Walther-Mabee, Manager of Conservation Area Operations; and Lisa Stocco, Manager of Strategic Communications and Environmental Education.

Public Survey

A total of 234 respondents participated in the public survey. Majority of respondents lived within the Grand River Watershed and 25% were Grand River Conservation Areas Membership holders. Conservation Land properties were the most popular property type visited followed by Grand River Conservation Areas and Rail Trails. The survey asked to what extent respondents supported the 5 objectives, and the majority strongly agreed or agreed (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Graph showing respondents overall support for strategy's objectives.

Based on additional comments and feedback received in the anonymous survey, 7 main themes were identified. See table 1 for a summary of themes, comments and suggested minor edits to



the Strategy (See also track change edits in Appendix A). All comments received are attached in Appendix B through E).

Table 1. Summary of feedback themes, general comments, reference in Strategy and GRCA's response.

Theme:	General Comments	Response
Environmental Protection	<p>Respondents emphasized the importance of environmental conservation and the protection of biodiverse areas and greenspaces for future generations. Feedback highlighted the significant role that GRCA properties contribute to protecting wildlife and sensitive ecosystems. Survey participants would like to see increased protection and conservation efforts to ensure these areas remain healthy, thriving ecosystems.</p>	<p>The <i>GRCA Land Contribution to Watershed Health</i> section and <i>Objective 2</i> details the environmental significance of many GRCA properties and discusses GRCA's restoration efforts and contribution to overall watershed health. Action items identified support ongoing conservation efforts on GRCA properties.</p>
Operations	<p>Feedback included a broad range of topics relating to operations and processes within: Conservation areas (including high admission rates, grounds maintenance, staffing resources, lack of year-round access, and enforcement patrols); Conservation lands (rail trail maintenance, hunting properties); Cottage lot program (shoreline management, fertilizer use/pollution, enforcement of development standards)</p>	<p><i>Objective 3</i> discusses GRCA's outdoor recreational programs and suggested actions to promote access and maintain infrastructure and amenities. Operational procedures and processes are outlined in Conservation Area Standard Operating Procedures.</p> <p><i>Strategy edit: bullet added under objective 5: "Ensure cottage lot program is in conformity with existing policies"</i></p>
Invasive Species	<p>Respondents highlighted the importance of managing invasive species such as LDD moths, phragmites and giant hogweed. They felt there needs to be increased efforts and actions to remove invasive species and would like to see a watershed approach to invasive species management.</p>	<p>Invasive species management is identified in the Strategy as an ongoing challenge. <i>Objective 2</i> identifies invasive species as a consideration when developing land management strategies on GRCA-owned land. More specific information would be incorporated into the Natural Heritage Restoration Strategy.</p> <p>Management of invasive species is the responsibility of the individual landowner and the GRCA has a program in place to manage invasive species on GRCA-owned lands.</p>
Climate Change	<p>Respondents commented that they felt it was important for the GRCA to prioritize climate change through mitigation and adaptation measures (such as flood control, carbon sequestration, and protection of green spaces, plant and animal species.).</p>	<p><i>Objective 2</i> addresses the significance of climate change and the important roles GRCA's properties play in mitigating impacts. All actions identified under this objective contribute to climate change response, adaptation and mitigation.</p>

Theme:	General Comments	Response
Partnerships	Participants commented that there is a need for enhanced, strategic, and sustainable community partnerships to improve watershed health and resiliency. This included examples such as partnerships with Indigenous groups, Local Land Trust, municipalities and trail way associations.	<i>Objective 4</i> is dedicated to describing the importance of partnerships with the GRCA, and the commitment to maintain and enhance new and existing relationships with municipalities, First Nations, and other community groups.
Indigenous Values	Respondents commented that it was important to establish a defined process to incorporate Indigenous values, knowledge, partnered conservation efforts and indigenous-aligned leadership, stewardship and strategies.	<i>Objective 4</i> identifies First Nations as a key community partner and discusses the GRCA's intent to grow relationships with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River through engagement, consultation and collaboration. <i>Strategy edit: clarified that the action item "Engagement Guidelines" will outline engagement and collaboration process with Indigenous communities</i>
Niska Landholdings	Majority of the Conservation Areas Strategy survey responses were regarding opposition to the approved Niska Management Plan (GM-06-24-64).	Decisions regarding specific landholdings are outside the scope of the Conservation Areas Strategy. The Niska Management Plan outlines the future direction for the property. GRCA's policies on acquisition and disposition outline processes and priorities for land transactions, and were approved through board report (GM-08-24-70).

Next Steps

Once approved, the final version of the Strategy will be posted on the GRCA's website. The Strategy will be reviewed every 5 years, and any subsequent updates will undergo public consultation and be posted online. Implementation of action items will be ongoing over the next 5 years, with targets to completion prior to the next review.

Human Heritage Policy

The GRCA approved a Human Heritage Policy in 2005, to support the GRCA's custodianship of the Canadian Heritage River designation and to promote stewardship of human heritage features on GRCA property (Appendix F). Following approval of the Policy, changes to provincial legislation strengthened the municipal role in built heritage protection.

The Human Heritage Policy was reviewed for alignment with recent amendments to the Conservation Authorities Act and regulations, and it was determined that most of the policies were either not implementable, no longer necessary, or could be addressed in other ways:

- Actions related to maintenance of the Canadian Heritage River designation have been incorporated into the Conservation Areas Strategy. Annual and decadal reporting to the Canadian Heritage River Secretariat will continue and the GRCA will continue to promote celebration of the Grand River as a Canadian Heritage River. Maintenance of the designation is a Category 3 (Authority) program.
- The GRCA can no longer advocate for human heritage preservation through the permit and planning programs. Sections 21.1.1 and 21.1.2 of the Conservation Authorities Act and Ontario Regulation 596/22 restrict the GRCA's ability to comment on permit and planning applications to matters relating to risks from natural hazards.
- The GRCA's Conservation Areas Strategy and Board-approved Land Acquisition and Disposition Policy (GM-08-24-70) will guide the GRCA's property decisions.
- Existing heritage studies and inventories remain a resource for staff and external partners.

Financial Implications:

Not applicable

Other Department Considerations:

An interdepartmental working group prepared the Conservation Areas Strategy. Implementation of the Strategy action items are within the approved annual budgets of the Conservation Area Operations, Conservation Lands, and Environmental Education departments.

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