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Planner: L. McDOUGALL

TO:	CHAIR AND MEMBERS PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE JUNE 20, 2016
FROM:	J. M. FLEMING MANAGING DIRECTOR, PLANNING AND CITY PLANNER
SUBJECT:	TRAIL PLANNING IN ENVIRONMENTALLY SIGNIFICANT AREAS – 2016 UPDATE

RECOMMENDATION

That, on the recommendation of the Managing Director, Planning and City Planner the following actions **BE TAKEN** regarding the update to the Planning and Design Standards for Trails in Environmentally Significant Areas:

- a) The *Guidelines for Management Zones and Trails in Environmentally Significant Areas, 2016* as endorsed by the Trails Focus Group, **BE APPROVED** as a planning and design tool for use in the development of trail master plans and/or Conservation Master Plans for Environmentally Significant Areas attached as Appendix “A”;
- b) The *Trail Standards Review for Conformance to Provincial and Federal Standards, 2016* report attached as Appendix “B”, **BE RECEIVED**;
- c) The members of the Trails Focus Group **BE THANKED** for their participation in the review process and for providing comments on the updated Trail Guideline document.

PREVIOUS REPORTS PERTINENT TO THIS MATTER

September 2012 – PEC, Application of the Trail Standards for ESA Planning Projects
 June 2012 – PEC, Trail Standards Report
 December 2010 – Built and Natural Environment Committee, Trails in ESAs

PURPOSE

In approving the 2012 document Council directed that the Trails Standard:

“...be reviewed by the ESA Trails Advisory Group after further application in finalizing the Coves ESA Conservation Master Plan (CMP) and developing the Meadowlily CMP, in order to provide any technical changes that would result in greater clarity of intent and purpose of the Standards, it being noted that the Standards should conform to Provincial and National standards.”

The Coves CMP was adopted by Council in October of 2014; however the Meadowlily Woods Environmentally Significant Area (ESA) CMP has not been finalized. In order to meet Council’s 2012 direction the Trail Standards were reviewed for conformance to Provincial and National standards by Dillon Consulting Inc. who were retained by staff in 2015 (attached as Appendix B).

More recently, Council directed staff to:

“...review the Trail Planning and Design Standards for Environmentally Significant Areas by the end of Q2, 2016.”

ESAs are our largest, core, natural heritage features and are generally over 40 ha in size. Currently, the City manages over 680 hectares of publically owned ESA lands that contain approximately 50km of trails. Many local volunteer groups and “Friends of” groups are members

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of the City's Adopt an ESA program and provide valuable, local stewardship of the ESAs. Nature London and its predecessors have played an important role in the protection of London's ESAs for generations including the efforts of the Mcllwraith Field Naturalists in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Approximately 25 ESAs and Potential ESAs were added to Schedule B-1 of the Official Plan in the 1990s through EEPAC's Candidate ESA Selection Criteria and Application Guidelines based on the Subwatershed Studies and other assessments.

The City of London's Strategy for the Natural Heritage System was introduced during the Vision London process in 1995 and was based on ecosystem planning principles. Significant work was achieved through the Subwatershed Studies to identify a natural heritage system consisting of our largest core areas connected by the Thames River and its tributaries and an array of woodlands, wetlands, wildlife habitat and watercourses in a matrix of urban and agricultural land uses. Core areas were recognized as Environmentally Significant Areas with special policies and measures provided for their protection. Some of these policies were developed to address the access and use of publicly owned ESAs:

- a) *Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) contain natural features and perform ecological functions that warrant their retention in a natural state (O.P. 15.4.1.);*
- b) *Programs for site and facility development, including descriptions of recreational programs and facilities to be provided if applicable, and details of access permitted to and within the area, including formalized pathways and trail systems (O.P. 15.3.8 c).*

Previously, through a two-year consultation period, the City developed the 2012 version of the Trail Guidelines for the planning and design of trails in ESAs. The 2012 Trail Guideline was consistent with and generally exceeded management practices surveyed from other urban municipalities in Canada and the United States and was generally more restrictive with respect to public access and permitted uses than any other Canadian municipality or even the standards for public access and use applied in Provincial and National Parks.

The intent of the updated version of the Trail Guideline document is to establish the policy, process, and practice that must be followed when establishing ecological management zones and reviewing the appropriateness of existing trails or planning new trails in ESAs, including:

- Establishing management zones based on Ecological Land Classification
- Establishing and implementing a trail hierarchy according to the ecological sensitivity of various management zones
- Identifying areas for review where existing trails (90% of situations) or planned trails may occur in or near significant ecological features

During the City's CMP process for ESAs, the focus to date has been on rationalizing the presence and/or location of existing trails, not installing new trails. Since 2008 over 4 km of previously managed trails have been closed in the City's ESAs. When Council approved the Coves ESA CMP in 2014, the recommendations included the closure of approximately 6 km of existing informal/unmanaged trails. No new trails were proposed in the CMP. In addition to the closing of trails, recommendations included improving or realigning existing trails to be sustainable and reduce identified impacts.

BACKGROUND

The Trail's Focus Group (TFG) included representatives from:

- Thames Valley Trail Association (TVTA)
- Nature London (NL)
- Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA)
- Environmental and Ecological Planning Advisory Committee (EEPAC)
- Accessibility Advisory Committee (ACCAC)
- Adopt an ESA Groups

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The TFG met 5 times to work with staff and consultants on the update to the Trail Guideline document. Public engagement is a key part of the trail planning process for the ESAs and extra effort and time was spent on this given the strong public interest in the City’s publically managed ESAs.

Trails Focus Group Meetings were held on:

- January 27, 2016 – This is what we have heard
- February 23, 2016 – How we measure up to Provincial and Federal Standards
- April 14, 2016 – A revision of the Trail Guidelines input and discussion
- May 5, 2016 – The revised Trail Guidelines
- May 16, 2016 – Endorsement by Trails Focus Group of the Trail Guidelines

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CONFORMANCE STUDY

As directed, staff hired Dillon consulting to carry out an analysis of how the City’s Trail Guideline conforms to Provincial and Federal Standards. *The Trail Standards Review for Conformance to Provincial and Federal Standards, 2016* report by Dillon Consulting identified a number of areas where the City’s 2012 Trail Guidelines either conform, do not conform, or exceed Provincial and National Park Standards (in the centre column). The revised Trail Standards are shown for reference in the last column.

Area of Comparison with Provincial and National Park Standards	Determination of Conformance with previous version of “Planning & Design Standards for Trails in ESAs, 2012”	Determination of Conformance with updated version of “Guidelines for Management Zones & Trails in ESAs, 2016”
Priorities for Protected Natural Areas	Conforms Ecological integrity is prioritized.	Conforms Ecological integrity is prioritized.
How Trail Systems are Governed	Conforms Management zones direct use however, only the City excludes use in Nature Reserve zones unless a Special Feature Overlay applies.	Conforms Management zones direct use and trails are permitted in all zones (subject to CMP or Trails Advisory Group process).
Accessibility of Trails	Does not Conform - Exceeds The City requires accessible trails be implemented where environmental conditions permit. This exceeds what the federal and provincial governments require.	Does not Conform - Exceeds The City requires accessible trails be implemented where environmental conditions permit. This exceeds what the federal and provincial governments require.
Consultation Requirements	Does not Conform - Exceeds Though all levels of government undertake consultation, the City’s CMP and TAG process allows for a level of consultation that exceeds what the federal and provincial governments are required to undertake.	Does not Conform - Exceeds Though all levels of government undertake consultation, the City’s CMP and Trails Advisory Group (TAG) process allows for a level of consultation that exceeds what the federal and provincial governments are required to undertake.

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Management Plan Process	Does not Conform - Exceeds The City's process exceeds the Government of Ontario's as the CMP process has more defined requirements than a "Management Direction" and the City has a proven record of implementing restoration projects to protect and maintain ecological integrity.	Does not Conform - Exceeds The City's process exceeds the Government of Ontario's as the CMP process has more defined requirements than a "Management Direction" and the City has a proven record of implementing restoration projects to protect and maintain ecological integrity.
Types of Management Zones	Conforms Noting that MNRF and Parks Canada include recreation and/or development language in their management zone descriptions and the City's do not.	Conforms Noting that MNRF and Parks Canada include recreation and/or development language in their management zone descriptions and the City's do not.
Assigning Management Zones	Does not Conform The City focuses solely on ecological characteristics rather than both the ecology and the recreational value.	Does not Conform The City focuses solely on ecological characteristics rather than both the ecology and the recreational value.
Making Changes to Management Zones	Conforms All 3 levels of government review management zones as part of their CMP (City), Management Direction (Provincial) or Management Plan (Federal) processes.	Conforms All 3 levels of government review management zones as part of their CMP (City), Management Direction (Provincial) or Management Plan (Federal) processes.
Where Trails are Permitted	Does not Conform The City is the only level of government where trails are not permitted in all zones. Trails are restricted in Nature Reserve management zones unless a Special Feature Overlay applies. Parks Canada includes a provision for paved trails within Wilderness Zones (equivalent to City's former Natural Area 1 management zone) and the City does not.	Conforms Public access is permitted in all zones (subject to CMP or TAG process). Parks Canada includes a provision for paved trails within Wilderness Zones (equivalent to City's new Nature Reserve Zone) and the City does not.
Permitted Activities	Does not Conform The list of recreational activities permitted by the City is more restrictive than the Province of Ontario and Parks Canada as they both allow cycling, mountain biking and horseback riding.	Does not Conform The list of recreational activities permitted by the City is more restrictive than the Province of Ontario and Parks Canada as they both allow cycling, mountain biking and horseback riding.

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Through this analysis, it became clear that the City’s 2012 Trail Guideline exceeded Provincial and Federal Standards in many ways. While exceeding other jurisdiction’s standards may be important or valuable in London, all “Areas of Comparison” were reviewed by the TFG with a focus on areas that did not conform. Through those discussions, the TFG reached general consensus on the following:

A) Priorities for Protected Natural Areas

Managing urban natural areas presents a challenge in balancing the protection of sensitive features and ecological function, while providing and controlling suitable access. Access to natural areas has been shown to be important for health benefits, social benefits. Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles and the experience in London’s ESAs demonstrates that introducing more legitimate users into an area is proven to reduce illegal activities. Supporting broader access to ESAs creates a greater appreciation of the value of London’s natural areas and will hopefully inspire the next generation of young stewards to care for our ESAs. All agreed that protection of ecological features and functions is the main priority through this process.

B) Accessibility of Trails

The City’s 2012 Trail Guideline was too restrictive in the placement of trails. All existing trails (90 % of situations) and planned trails in or near sensitive ecological features will be reviewed for ecological compatibility through the process, rather than having a blanket restriction on trails in some areas. To address the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act regulations, the updated Trail Guidelines are clearer on satisfying accessibility requirements.

C) Consultation Requirements

The City exceeds Provincial and Federal standards in its consultation efforts through a CMP process. It was agreed that London’s current practice is desirable for ESAs and allows many Londoners to have input into the process. By revising some of the technical processes, and potentially developing a CMP template to accelerate some parts of the process we anticipate that the overall length of time to complete the CMP consultation process can be reduced, potentially saving capital funds for CMP recommendations to be implemented to protect the ESAs in a timely way.

D) Management Plan Process

The City exceeds the planning processes used by the Province for Provincial Parks and used by the Federal Government for National Parks. In addition to the enhanced consultation efforts, the City includes additional process steps and outcomes from a CMP process. The TFG did not suggest changing our processes. We may be able to shorten the length of the process, by the changes made to the trail planning process in the updated Guideline. The City is an identified leader among Ontario municipalities and other levels of government in demonstrating a proactive approach to the management and control of invasive species in protected natural areas.

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E) Assigning Management Zones

Unlike the Provincial and Federal Government the City focuses solely on ecological characteristics, rather than both the ecological and potential recreational value in assigning management zones. While satisfying the process the updated Guideline will continue to leave access secondary to the protection of ecological features and functions.

F) Permitted Activities

Unlike the Provincial and Federal Government the City restricts permitted uses on trails in ESAs primarily to hiking (cycling is permitted on some trails, in 3 ESAs). Much discussion has occurred in the last 5 years about permitting other users. While the UTRCA has developed a hiking/cycling trail at Fanshawe Lake and Boler Mountain has cycling only trails, Komoka Provincial Park (identified as Kilworth ESA on Schedule B-1 of the Official Plan) permits hiking/cycling on designated trails however, the issue for many ESA users remains “user conflict”. The International Mountain Biking Association provides trail building training and publishes guidelines that assert that a well-planned trail system can “*minimize user conflict and environmental damage*”. Many individuals and groups have sought increased access to the ESA trail system for recreational trail cycling, but this desire was not incorporated into the process.

Similarly, upgraded, hardened trails can be constructed to reduce the potential for erosion, support a higher level of use and provide improved accessibility in the more culturally influenced, less sensitive areas in the ESAs; however, this does increase the potential for user conflict with hikers. Subject to the process in the updated Guideline, upgraded trails can be installed in these less sensitive areas of the ESAs, and with the advice of the chair of the ACCAC there is an obligation to do so where ecologically appropriate under the new Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

The TFG’s comments on the 2012 version of the Trail Guidelines centred on five themes:

1. Objective Application of Management Zones (MZ)
2. Determining Boundaries and Sizes of MZs
3. Ecological Indicators
4. Determination of Access Zones / Overlays
5. Trail Location and Trail Maintenance

The updated 2016 version of the Trail Guideline addresses comments on the first two themes through the use of Ecological Land Classification (ELC) as the objective basis for applying Management Zones and determining their boundaries and sizes. ELC is a comprehensive and consistent provincial approach for ecosystem description, inventory and management objectives that is already incorporated as a requirement in the City’s Data Collection Standards in the Environmental Management Guidelines. Communities or ecosites identified under the community series of plantation (CUP), cultural meadow (CUM), cultural thicket (CUT), cultural savannah (CUS) and cultural woodland (CUW), as well as manicured areas such as mowed lawn or hedgerows, are to be zoned as Natural Environment. All other natural communities or ecosites are to be zoned as Nature Reserve. This simplifies the delineation of management zones and the revised process ensures trails are still reviewed for compatibility with the ecological features and functions of the ESA.

The remaining themes are addressed through the updated Trail Guidelines as ecological

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indicators are now reviewed through the use of a revised “*Table 1: Significant Ecological Features and General Compatibility with Trails*”, and the names, types and descriptions for Access Zones and Overlays were revised. Two new process charts (chart’s 2 and 3) in the Trail Guidelines are now used to differentiate the review and locations of existing trails (90% of situations) and new trails respectively.

NEXT STEPS

The protection the features and functions of the ESAs remains the number one priority as identified by the Official Plan and the TFG. Public use of ESAs offers a scenic, restorative and educational trail experience for Londoners within their City. Access to ESAs creates a greater appreciation of the value of London’s natural areas and will hopefully inspire the next generation of young stewards to care for our ESAs. The updated Trail Guidelines will provide a repeatable process and direction for trails and access to London’s publically owned ESAs.

Members of the TFG who participated in this six month review process of the 2012 document have contributed significantly to the production of a more transparent and defensible Trail Guideline. Like all other City Guidelines it is anticipated that a review of the updated 2016 version of Trail Guideline would be required if there were a major change to relevant legislation for example. Given the substantial investment of time and other resources devoted to creating the 2012 document and more recently to updating the Trail Guidelines it is hoped the focus over the next ten years will be on completing and implementing CMPs and CMP recommendations with the new Trail Guidelines in place to protect the ESAs in a timely way.

The City is an identified leader among Ontario municipalities and other levels of government in demonstrating a proactive approach to the management and control of invasive species in protected natural areas. Now that the Trail Guidelines have been updated the City can re-focus on completing and implementing CMPs for the protection and enhancement of ecological integrity and resilience of City owned ESAs. Despite London’s leadership and proven record of implementing restoration projects since 2008 the threat posed by invasive species remains a more pressing ecological concern in the ESAs than trails are. As noted previously, the focus of trail review to date is on rationalizing the presence and/or location of existing trails, not installing new trails, and as noted by a member of the TFG “*no single trail will result in negative impact to the whole ESA*”. However, the un-checked proliferation of invasive species could ultimately impact the health and status of an ESA.

This Trail Guideline will be used in new Conservation Master Plan (CMP) and Trails Advisory Group (TAG) processes. The approval of this Trail Standard will permit the City to complete several key projects that have been on hold since the Trail Guideline update process began in late 2015. This includes the Medway Valley Heritage Forest ESA (south) CMP, and the Meadowlily Woods ESA CMP.

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