

## **Report to Community and Protective Services Committee**

To: Chair and Members Community and Protective Services Committee

From: Angus Johnson, Greenspace Alliance

Subject: Greenspace Protection at the former River Road Golf Course, Ward 1

Date: Dec. 16, 2022

Recommendation: That, on the recommendation of, Mary Ann Hodge, Climate Action London, and Danalynn Williams, First Nation Phragmites Control this report BE RECEIVED.

### **Summary:**

To best mitigate the effects of global warming and climate change, the City of London should retain the entire 134 acre property inclusive of the former River Road Golf Course, adopt a series of priorities to promote carbon neutrality in the use of the property, and use a process with community participation to determine actual uses for the property.

### **Using a Climate Lens:**

“Global warming is causing catastrophic fires, floods, droughts, and upending lives across the globe. Polar warming is taking place at an unprecedented rate. The melting of glaciers is predicted to raise the level of our oceans to unprecedented levels, putting the homes of millions at risk. We are facing an existential crisis.

The cause of this crisis is the heat and carbon dioxide being emitted by our cities, factories, industries, and vehicles powered by internal combustion engines. Since all growing plants absorb carbon dioxide and emit oxygen, any greenspace where plants are growing is a small force combating the overheating of our planet. Therefore, it only makes sense to not only protect the greenspaces we have in our urban areas, but to increase the amount of greenspace in our cities and expand our urban canopies.”(1)

Climate Change/ Global warming is affecting every decision made by cities in an effort to mitigate its effects, in planning for housing, commerce, industry or greenspace. No longer relegated to afterthoughts, dealing with these changes needs to be the central priority of all planning. And in a sense all other components of plans need to flow from this priority. The plan for the use of this 134 acre property in London, Ontario should be no different.

### **The Proposal for Use of River Road property by city staff**

#### **A. Summary**

The proposal by city staff is that 85% of the property become a park with paths, the remainder, 20 acres, will be reserved for development possibly by light industry with the proceeds from sale of the property to go to the golf reserve fund for use by Thames Valley and Fanshawe, golf courses.

There is little mention in the plan of urban forest protection and development, and to what percentage, if any, canopy will be planted on the property, but there is mention of the possible addition of an extended ‘park’ area on the property on the north side of River Road.

Since we are standing on the edge of a climatic abyss, it needs to be considered for all properties, regardless of use, residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, what the percentage of urban forest canopy for this or any city property should be.

### **Tree Canopy Goals**

The best estimates available indicate that the current entire forest canopy for London Ontario is between 26 and 27 %. The current target for London's canopy growth is 34 % by 2065. Strong scientific evidence suggests that the overall canopy cities should aim at is 40%. This is now the actual recommendation of the American Forestry Association, the largest and most influential organization to weigh in on this issue. For comparison, the city of Toronto currently has a canopy of 31% and a target of 40% by 2050. The most recent science establishing the importance of the 40% number came from a study that was completed in Madison Wisconsin in 2019. The study aimed at finding a base cooling factor for cities with varying amounts of canopy. The conclusion reached was in a city with a patchwork of varying amounts of canopy to achieve a cooling effect of the whole, the average of the parts needed to approach a 40% forest canopy.

The canopy patchwork of any city is made up of areas with varying abilities to cool themselves. Normally, a city is a mixture of areas of pavement, grass, and trees. The denser the forested areas the more air is cooled in essentially by a process of evapotranspiration. Areas with large amounts of pavement, most types of rooftops and other radiating surfaces, reflect and generate heat (and carbon dioxide). These heat islands, as referred to, instead of producing any cooling effect need to be cooled by the moving air from other areas which do.

The cooling work of the canopy is best perceived as an ongoing battle between these areas composed of different surfaces. The city of Toronto pursues an aggressive forestry program at a cost of about 68.7 million dollars (London \$ 5.2 million) annually and simultaneously monitors the ongoing total amount of pavement laid in the city recognizing that the effectiveness of the canopy is inexorably connected to the amount of paved surface growing in the city at the same time. The ongoing value of grassy areas that are not forested also deserve recognition because these areas cool the air to some extent and contribute to the processing of carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

### **Adopting a 40% Tree Canopy target**

While it is tempting to say that London should adopt a 40% target for some time in the future an assessment of the likelihood of ever achieving that target should consider factors positive and negative playing into that likelihood. On the positive side,

- (1) London already owns many forested and unforested areas that can be improved,
- (2) There is growing public awareness of the need for canopy improvement
- (3) There is probably willingness, properly stimulated for public participation in more aggressive residential tree planting programs.
- (4) Organizations like Re-Forest London which do excellent work with tree planting programs have the infrastructure and networking available to assist with implementing broader goals.

### **Obstacles to the 40% Tree Canopy target**

There are substantial obstacles that a 40 % target would face. First, the increase in cost to try and achieve this would be substantial. Using the same metrics as Toronto uses for funding, on a cost per tree basis, to achieve the current objective (34% by 2065) will require, multiplying the current budget at least by four. To get to 40%, double that again. Second, the amount of land that's available to plant trees is shrinking at a rate such that it would require extraordinary measures to create space to plant to anything like that percentage of canopy.

Grasping this space problem, begins with a look at the current canopy pattern of the city. Like many other cities, London has older parts of the city at its core, with newer development extending in rings from the core. In general, the strongest and densest canopy is in some of the core areas. The weakest is in many of newest suburban rings, acres of frankly, treeless sprawl. In a nutshell, the space problem comes to this. Not only are the older parts of the city the best canopied, they are also the easiest to improve because there is planting room, for a number of reasons, but most connected simply to the way that space is patterned in the neighbourhoods.

### **The Impact of Sprawl on Tree Canopy**

The problem with many of the 'newer' developments is that not only is there very little canopy, there is really no place to plant more trees to improve it. This happened and continues to happen because developers are allowed to essentially squeeze as many buildings on to land as physically possible and there are no regulations that mandate canopy for developments of any percentage. Residential property is not alone in this. Neither are there canopy mandates governing the use of commercial, industrial, institutional or even recreational properties.

### **Alternative Canopy Options**

All of this is not to suggest that planting trees in the ground in open urban space is the only way to increase canopy. Roof top gardens offer an alternative. Tree planting where degraded pavement in parking lots is replaced with planted trees rather than pavement is an excellent alternative as it simultaneously creates canopy and shades pavement. There are good examples of the latter already in place in downtown London.

The shortage of alternative places for planting will put **more and more pressure on the greenspaces owned by the city to be used for the planting of canopy**. Undoubtedly parks and golf courses will be increasingly viewed through this lens. And this will be happening at the same time as more greenspace will be required for recreational purposes just to accommodate population growth and the inevitable demand it will create for recreational greenspace.

### **Industrial Development Creates Heat Islands**

Clearly there's a fundamental problem with relegating 20 acres of the property to industrial development.(1. Appendix B) If no recreational use is planned for it, it should probably be covered it with trees. But if you convert it to industrial property, no impediment to the contrary, all of that proportion of the property could be transformed into pavement and rooftop and other impervious surfaces, creating potentially a 20 acre patch, which reflects and generates heat, the classic 'heat island'.

1. <https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/FileStream.ashx?DocumentId=95154>

And the rest of the canopy must compensate for it, by cooling and cleaning the air from this piece of the patchwork, as this piece of the canopy patchwork can perform little of those functions on its own. So in the interests of mitigating the effects of global warming this potential industrialization shouldn't happen. These twenty acres should remain as greenspace, and probably forested greenspace to some extent.

### **The Thames Valley Parkway Vision**

It is suggested that the southerly portion of the golf course could accommodate a new Riverfront District Park as compared to parks like Springbank, Greenway, etc. Climate change concerns aside, consider what the look, the vision if you will, for this new park area would be, essentially, two areas of greenspace sandwiching an area of industry. For comparison, consider the look of the Springbank park system in the western side of the city. Two areas, a 27 hole golf facility, an extended medium density forested area, a river running between..

### **Financial and fiscal considerations**

The total cost of executing the city staff plan is never addressed, and little discussion given to potential revenues, other than to indicate that in some way the selling of the twenty acres will reduce budgetary pressures on the golf system, those also unexplained. More importantly, neither is it explained why this area of the city should be required to industrialize a piece of property to cover budget items for two golf courses elsewhere .

In the past when enquiries were made as to how money from the sale of River Road was to be spent. Items listed were pavement repair, AC repair and roofing, at Fanshawe G.C. and Thames Valley G.C. If this remains the case it would seem unwise to attempt funding pressing needs from funds that may be years in realization, if indeed the funds are ever realized at all.

Moreover, environmental issues involved certainly with pavement repair and AC units, would put the city in the position of selling off greenspace, and creating pavement in order to pay for more pavement and AC units. The suggestion here would be that whatever these kind of budget needs might turn out be they are far outweighed by the negative climate change consequences that dealing with them in this way would entail.

When this concept of River Road being sold to help pay for budget items at Fanshawe and Thames Valley, in Feb. 2021 a figure of over two million dollars for unfunded infrastructure repairs was brought into the discussion, and this was interpreted by some members of council as referring to repairs that were all 'pressing needs' at these facilities. There was no real enquiry at the time as to how this figure was arrived at. In short, there was no requirement to provide an itemized list of these future expenditures.

Enquiries put in place later, were unsuccessful in receiving a list detailing the over two million dollars in budget items. What was explained however was that this figure may have been arrived at by adding amounts for actual planned repairs to an amount that is 'theoretically' set aside for unfunded costs for covering depreciation in city infrastructure. Questions arose as to whether these abstract costs for replacement and maintenance of city infrastructure would practically apply to specific needs of buildings like golf course clubhouses. This is speculative of course but whatever figure is place on budgetary needs

for the golf system, a more detailed accounting of how that number is arrived at will be called for now, than was in Feb. 2021.

To a large extent these discussions should they occur will be academic. The argument against this budgetary accommodation now twofold. First, there is no reason why those who have this River Road greenspace, whoever they are, are obligated in any way to sacrifice it to industrialization to pay for repairs, real or abstract, at Thames and Fanshawe or anywhere else. Second, the need to cover budget real or abstract, is far outweighed by the need to avoid climate change consequences dealing with them by industrializing, would entail.

### **Extending the Thames Valley Parkway System**

On the map showing the conceptual plan by parks planning, "Extension of the Thames Valley Parkway (TVP) " is how the system of pathways on the River Road property is referred to. 1(Appendix C)

If you walk the pathways from the south eastern end, where the path meets Hamilton Road it travels around essentially a large triangle with a small branch running off it to the northeastern corner where it stops near Clarke Rd. There are also three 'Eastern' branches, which join to the eastern tip of the triangle running to "River Road Park".

The entire upper two sides of the large roughly triangular pathway follows an existing roadway, which actually makes for quite easy walking. If the plan is to pave these paths as it is elsewhere in the system it will be less expensive here where the base is generally level, and well-established. Most of the lower base of the triangle follows the river and runs down what were the fairways of three river holes on the back nine. The construction of these paths, through a part of the course that tends to be quite wet at times, will be more expensive. One is struck as you walks the paths with how large a piece of property this is. The triangle itself completely encloses six holes, three of them long par fives, without impacting any of these paths.

Since these paths are called 'extensions' of the system, consider how, the pathway connects to the rest of Thames Valley Parkway system which is basically to the west of the pathways. Checking the dictionary it speaks of the "act of extending" and to "extend" as "to increase the length or duration of; lengthen". So, if these are to be considered "extensions" it needs to be shown how they are connected to the rest of the TVP, or at least how they could be. These two most westerly end points, one at Hamilton Rd.(south) the other near Clarke Rd. (north) and the closest points to the 'rest' of the TVP system and the ones it seems most reasonable to examine as beginnings of 'extensions'.

Consider first the south end of the pathway system, the point at which it exits/enters the property at Hamilton Road. The nearest potential point of connection to the existing TVP is near Pottersburg Park, near where the pathway crosses Hamilton Rd. a distance as the crow flies of 2.17 km. Not quite close enough for that branch from River Rd. to be considered an extension. Looking at these two points to see how they could be connected, the closest possibility, relatively free of obstruction, would seem to be to take a route along the North side of the river.

Since the path to that point basically runs from the west along the river before turning north and since the south western point at Hamilton Rd. is quite near the river, the plan could be to continue the path  
1. <https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/FileStream.ashx?DocumentId=95154>

by this relatively clear route along the river. Possibly the city could own enough land along the river or could acquire enough to make that feasible? However, when that path is examined, one substantial obstacle makes the route virtually impossible, East Park Golf Club, which occupies over half the riverfront property between these two points.

It is extremely unlikely that the city is going to be able to buy a strip of land through the golf course. It would also be unlikely for the owners of East Park to allow the city to build a pathway down the fairways of the course. Unlike buying a piece of property from a private landowner who may not have any pressing need to retain the property, the pathway would be fundamentally disruptive to the operation of this business.

Another possibility here would seem to be to take the path along the South side of the river. This route, somewhat longer, would have to face its own set of environmental obstacles, issues of private land ownership and the immediate challenge of crossing the river twice.

The Northeastern pathway that ends near Clarke Rd. actually runs just above a small subdivision park (Frederick Park). Oddly, this path does not extend all the way to Clarke Rd. even though the roadway it runs on, does. Instead, it stops part way down. It actually runs along beside the Clarke Rd. Enviro Depot and must be on city land. From the end of the path to the nearest point on the TVP, travelling on a slight angle to the North to a point between Hamilton Rd. and Kiwanis Park again as the crow flies it is 1.35 km., much shorter than the first route.

Upon examination, the area between this point and the nearest point on the existing TVP runs through almost continuous housing development. The only clear (avoiding buildings) and reasonably straight path, that connects the points (with a jog to the south at the beginning) runs along the north edge of Hamilton Rd. It would require, buying and connecting approximately 60 small pieces of residential property to realize.

In summary, only as a kind of a pipe dream could the pathways proposed be referred to, as it stands, as an "Extension of the Thames Valley (TVP) system".

#### Recreational Applications in the city staff plan

There is little offered in the plan by way of recreational opportunities at the greenspace for communities near this property. At this point the sole amenity is the aforementioned pathways. The history of golf on this property over thirty years, had some financial ups and downs, but all told, this was a state of the art, well used, well-designed public golf course, which created jobs for staff who worked there, recreational opportunities for thousands from nearby and the city as a whole. They brought considerable business to local businesses when many golfers shopped near where they played. While to our knowledge the city has never attempted to assess the overall financial impact of the closing of River Road and the degradation of the facility, it needs to accept responsibility for both. As a matter of simple redress more by way of recreational uses, needs to be offered to the community. Taking into consideration that it has now been two years since any recreational opportunities have been available to the public at this site.

With that being said, it will be interesting to see exactly what the community looks for here by way of recreational opportunities broadly understood, when it has the opportunity to present its ideas.

## **The Priorities for the use of the River Road Property**

(1) The entire River Road property is identified as having archaeological potential and Policy 615, *The London Plan*, requires indigenous monitors for archaeological fieldwork. Archaeological potential will need to be considered before any applications for the property can be considered.

(1) The final proposal for use(s) of the property to encompass the entire property of 134 acres.

(2) Planning for tree planting on the property will be clearly described, mapped and result in a total minimum urban forest canopy of 40 % after a period of thirty years.

(3) No conventional pavement, asphalt or cement will be used in any new pathways or roadways. All must be green plant based technology.

(4) All applications and activities recreational and otherwise will be designed, and possibly adjusted to accommodate these priorities.

(5) A process of community participation will be involved in the proposal and selection of applications, activities, recreational and otherwise, for the property.

(6) Protection and potential increase in ESA places is guaranteed. Including the protection from encroachment by any other applications on the property.

(7) Should the need for a pathway through the property from the east side of the property to the west (and obviously vice versa) eventually arise, a guarantee will be put in place to provide a route for such a pathway. The pathway itself will need to be of the aforementioned nature with additional costs for its construction to be absorbed by the city. The inherent wisdom of this particular plan is that since at this point the location of the east and west connecting points to the River Road pathway link, are unknown, presumably as close to the edge of the property as possible, it makes sense to wait until they are known before constructing a path to interconnect the TVP, from the west to east extremity.

(8) The operation of all facilities and programs within the River Road facility shall strive for state of the art in terms of carbon neutrality. For example no petroleum powered equipment shall be used for regular maintenance. Allowance being made for the use of such equipment where no comparable electrically powered equipment exists.

(9) State of the art research will be used to identify plant species e.g. grasses, to identify the types that best accomplish carbon reduction and apply where possible in practice. Similarly, state of the art research will be used in the use of herbicides on the property to prevent harm to the environment and species of plant and animal life habituated to this environment, and mini-environmental areas.

(10) Features of the River Road facility will serve as a model, or template, to be applied in the future to city greenspaces.

## **Considerations in the Process of Community Participation in Creating Applications**

The framework and priorities of this proposal for the use of the River Road property complete it remains to say something about the actual uses of the property itself and what features they might have. At the

outset, it is not the intention here to present suggestions that might limit the creativity and imagination of the public who will undoubtedly provide unanticipated and wonderful ideas for the use of the River Road property, only to provide some broad guidance.

(1) The city will consider operating with partners in the development of uses for the property, generally on a not for profit basis, where any revenues generated by uses will be used to defray costs or finance improvements to the property itself, and where the use of volunteer contributions are encouraged as part of the not for profit approach.

(2) Special consideration will be given to applications from the indigenous communities in recognition of their fundamental ownership of this greenspace and the value the community places on its protection.

(3) Projects that in any way promote diversity, inclusion and equity will be encouraged.

(4) Projects that promote education for any group from the very young to the growing community of lifelong learners will similarly be encouraged.

(5) Projects that potentially offer any opportunities for improving the physical and mental health of the public at large, will similarly be encouraged.

### **Conclusions:**

- We urge you to accept this proposal for consideration.
- Then, provide staff the opportunity to offer suggestions for changes or modifications.
- Then, open this up to public participation, whereby the proposal complete with applications might seek final approval for implementation.

Submitted by: Angus Johnson

Supported by: The Executive and Membership, Greenspace Alliance ([greenspacealliance.ca](http://greenspacealliance.ca))