

Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area Master Plan Executive Summary

The Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area Master Plan will be the principal guiding policy document for the planning, development and resource management of the Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area.

The Master Plan sets out park zoning and Conservation Area policies for resource management and operations as well as development policies to guide proposed Conservation Area management over the next 10 years.

The development of concepts and alternatives and management considerations were released for circulation and response from the public and related agencies in June 2012.

Upon approval of this Master Plan by the Hamilton Conservation Authority Board of Directors, submission will be made to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Niagara Escarpment Commission for review and approval that the plan conforms to the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

Vision Statement

The Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area, with its spectacular waterfalls, escarpment views, , extensive natural habitat supporting rare species and vegetation communities, trails and cultural heritage features, provides both local and out of town visitors, of all ages and abilities, a memorable and educational experience, while also balancing protection of sensitive natural environments.

Significant Site Attributes

- two impressive waterfalls, Webster's and Tew's Falls and two smaller waterfalls
- a 100 metre deep gorge measuring 1 kilometre in length from the Escarpment edge;
- a topography ranging from gently rolling tableland above the waterfalls to vertical cliffs and talus slopes of the creek-cut gorge;
- significant biological communities exhibited within the Webster's Falls-Spencer Gorge Conservation Area, unique to southern Ontario;
- tempered climate due the proximity to Lake Ontario and south facing orientation of the Escarpment;
- Bruce Trail side trail networks that link Tew's and Webster's Falls with the Dundas Peak and main Bruce Trail;
- Trail connection between the Greenville Optimist Community Park and the historic Crooks Hollow Trail;
- designation as part of a World Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO and as a Natural Environment Park under the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System;
- identification as a provincially significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI)

- over 500 plant species (4 Species at Risk, 9 provincially rare, 14 regionally rare and 51 locally rare), 42 bird species (1 Species at Risk), 13 mammal species, 27 Lepidoptera species (1 Species at Risk, 1 provincially rare and one locally uncommon), 13 Odonata species, and 6 herpetofauna species can be found in the Conservation Area and immediate surrounding area;
- several cultural heritage features providing evidence of the important role of this area had in the early industrialization of Upper Canada.

Existing Policy Framework

The Master Plan for the Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area builds on and supports Hamilton Conservation Authority strategic directions and provincial policy documents including the Niagara Escarpment Plan and Greenbelt Plan. Within the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area is recognized as a well established component of the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System.

Summary of Significant Issues and Challenges

- **Natural Heritage Protection:** This Conservation Area's unique and diverse natural heritage system is generally well protected and secure. This Area has been designated a Provincial Area of Natural and Scientific Interest and an Environmentally Significant Area. However, some deterioration was identified at certain heavily used locations along the trail system and at the bottom of the Gorge, highlighting the need for protection measures to be put in place.
- **Increased Visitations:** Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area has experienced an ongoing increase in visitations with a current estimated annual visitation of 80,000. This growth represents regional resident's positive attitude towards participation in healthy-lifestyle pursuits and interest in the waterfalls, but also represents a threat to the sensitive natural ecology of the site unless properly managed and serviced with appropriate facilities.
- **Facilities and Amenities:** The Conservation Area has three parking lots, trails, open lawn areas, a picnic pavilion, bridge structures, overlooks, a maintenance facility, protective fencing, and a range of interpretive and informational signage. Washroom facilities are currently limited to portable washrooms.
- **Financial Constraints:** Over the past 20 years, with changes in government priorities, provincial funding for park development and enhancement has been eliminated. The City of Hamilton provides capital and major maintenance funding to the HCA, from which the HCA must maintain projects or develop new ones on the 11,000 acres HCA owns or manages. This limited funding has resulted in the deterioration of some natural heritage features, facilities and amenities as well as the quality of the visitor experience.

Recommended Policies

The master plan that has been developed continues to support the Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Area as a significant natural heritage area as well as regional destination for local visitors and tourists:

- Ensures protection and enhancement of the natural heritage of the site;
- Promotes environmental values, healthy lifestyles, outdoor recreation and education;
- Prescribes a management strategy for vehicular traffic, parking and emergency services access;
- Promotes trail linkages beyond the site, and alternate modes of transportation.

Highlights of the Development Recommendations

The master plan identifies a range of new facilities to provide enhanced natural heritage protection, visitor experience, amenities, interpretive opportunities and recreational conveniences. The main elements of the master plan are summarized as follows:

- A system of directional, entrance, interpretive and other signage that is consistently branded across the Conservation Area and standardized to meet accessibility, readability, risk management and marketing objectives;
- Reduced impacts to local residents through transportation planning and off-site parking management;
- Promote alternate forms of transportation to the area including trail linkages and shuttle service from Christie Lake Conservation Area;
- Closure of the Webster's Falls stairs, with long term targets for re-establishing visitor access while balancing environmental protection;
- Improved visitor facilities including new year-round washroom facility;
- Accessibility upgrades for identified pathways and washroom facilities to meet AODA standards;
- Improve trail safety through re-surfacing, fencing, signage and trail closures;
- Improved orientation for visitors and emergency services through area identification markers;
- Promote trail linkages between Christie Lake, Crooks Hollow and Spencer Gorge-Webster's Falls Conservation Areas;
- Environmental protection-restoration, mitigating impacts and on-going environmental monitoring;
- Expand on public educational /interpretive opportunities;

Cost Summary

Parking

The Transportation Study provides a comprehensive analysis of the traffic and parking related issues and has determined that the volume of vehicular traffic to the site and lack of space on site to meet existing and future anticipated parking demand cannot be met through on-site improvements.

The transportation recommendations provide improved vehicular access to the site, minimize impacts to local residents, reduce congestion on local roads, improve access for emergency services, while also providing a more positive visitor experience. It is recommended that a shuttle from Christie Lake Conservation Area be established. implementation of site specific operational improvements at both Webster's Falls and Tew's Falls entrances which will improve traffic and parking operations and enhance site circulation.

Capital Costs **\$157,000.**

- Includes area and road signage, improve driveway configuration, landscape restoration, improved accessibility, visitor kiosk

Lower Gorge Access:

Re-instating safe access to the lower gorge from Webster's Falls park area and Dundas is recommended as a part of this Master Plan. This step requires the construction of a new stairway and overlook, habitat restoration and management and a solution to a pedestrian crossing of the CN rail corridor in Dundas.

Capital Costs **\$539,000.**

- Includes stairway installation, lower area viewpoint, interpretive & warning signage, restoration of valley trail and disturbed natural areas and safety fencing.

Overall General Improvements

There are a number of other recommendations included in the Master Plan that will provide improvements including new washroom facilities, trail improvements, signage, fencing, new stairs (between Tew's Falls and Webster's Falls parking lot), vegetation restoration, overlooks, picnic pavilion repairs, cobblestone bridge repairs, a new gatehouse, and bicycle parking. The following cost is associated with these improvements:

Capital Costs **\$640,000.**

Total Capital Costs Estimate: **\$1,345,000.00.**