



Board of Directors Meeting

Addendum

Thursday, December 7, 2023 at 6:00 p.m.

Hamilton Conservation Authority is now conducting meetings in a hybrid format via an in-person and Webex platform.

**All hybrid meetings can be viewed live on HCA's You Tube Channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/user/HamiltonConservation>**

9. Member Briefing

9.1. Interim Feedback on HCA Strategic Plan Renewal

– Anne Bermingham /
Michael Howes
(2WA Consultants)

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Interim Report
to
Board of Directors
on
Phase 1 – Data Gathering
Strategic Planning Process for
2025-2029

Submitted by Anne Bermingham and Michael H. Howes



November 30, 2023

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Document Overview

This is the interim report on the data gathering phase of the Hamilton Conservation Authority's strategic planning project 2025-2029. The material is laid out by question, in alignment with the interview guide. It contains the data gathered from one-on-one interviews, and from focus groups conducted over the August to September period.

An Executive Summary is not provided due to the nature of this document and its intended use. The aim is for first the Strategic Plan Steering Committee and then the Board of Directors to come to their own conclusions about the strategic directions. Having said that, there will be a slide presentation made to both bodies that will provide a more focused data set to make it easier to understand the data.

Methodology

The groups / individuals who provided input during the data gathering phase included:

- The Hamilton Conservation Authority Executive Team, Management Team, and a cross section of staff members
- The Board of Directors
- The Conservation Advisory Board
- The Hamilton Conservation Foundation
- The Ontario Trail Association
- Bruce Trail Conservancy
- The Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority
- The Grand River Conservation Authority
- Conservation Ontario
- The Bay Area Climate Change Council
- Bay Area Restoration Council
- McMaster University (Design & Construction)
- City of Hamilton (City / Hamilton Conservation Liaison Committee)

Groups still to involve in the process, during Phase 3 (socialise the draft report with stakeholders prior to finalisation):

- Six Nations of the Grand River
- Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation
- Township of Puslinch
- Royal Botanical Gardens

The questions used in the interviews and focus groups are outlined in Appendix A, below.

On how the Hamilton Conservation Authority has excelled in delivering on its mission: “To lead in the conservation of our watershed and connect people to nature.”

The four most common answers to this question were:

1. **Pandemic Response and Community Engagement:** Many people pointed out the way in which the Hamilton Conservation Authority swiftly adapted to COVID-19 restrictions by keeping conservation areas open and safe for public use during lockdowns, helping people stay connected with nature. As part of that response the Hamilton Conservation Authority shifted educational programs to virtual platforms, ensuring uninterrupted environmental education for students.
2. **Environmental Conservation and Land Management:** The creation of the Saltfleet Conservation Area (which involved developing wetlands to aid in flood control and ecosystem rehabilitation, enhancing connectivity with other lands) was the most commonly cited example.
3. **Innovation and Infrastructure:** The most cited example was the overall response to demand for outdoor activities, by introducing new cabins in the Valens CA for non-traditional campers, as a way to introduce people to nature. Other examples included: Incorporation of technology to enhance visitor experience and environmental education (interpretive apps); and electronic gate systems for smoother park access and crowd management.
4. **Water Management and Quality:** The Hamilton Conservation Authority was noted as being involved in extensive water resource engineering and quality testing, often in partnership with other entities, ensuring guidance and oversight in water resources management. The organization also participated actively in habitat rehabilitation projects, for instance, along Spencer Creek, and contributed to the Chedoke Creek water sampling.

No revisions to the Vision or Mission were suggested by any of the respondents.

On how the Hamilton Conservation Authority could work differently to deliver on its vision: “A healthy watershed for everyone” over the next 5 years.

There was a wide range of answers to this question. Below are the top four areas that respondents identified:

1. **Land Acquisition and Stewardship:** There is a strong emphasis on acquiring more land for conservation, as this approach is seen as one of the most effective methods for watershed protection and growth. As well, there should be a continued focus on fostering private land stewardship and employing technology for monitoring purposes. The idea of focusing more on creating and managing new wetlands was proposed, which would require strategic land acquisition or partnerships.
2. **Community Engagement and Education / Public Relations and Communication:** There were two broad areas of responses to this question as noted in the title. Both spoke specifically to a need to educate the public on what the HCA is and what it does, along with its relationships to various levels of government.

Suggestions include increasing outreach and educational efforts, possibly through updated signage or interactive educational programs within the conservation areas. Respondents suggested that more public education about what conservation authorities do and the benefits they provide would be beneficial to both the public and the HCA. Finally, respondents suggested emphasising connections with diverse community groups, including indigenous nations and new Canadians, is seen as essential for inclusive conservation efforts.

3. **Technology and Innovation:** Utilising technology, such as mobile apps for information translation and interactive tours, was a common theme amongst respondents. The suggestion of increased technology was related to the internal practices of the HCA, ensuring that staff were working with the most efficient, effective technology.
4. **Diversity, Accessibility, and Inclusivity:** This topic came up in both this question as well as in other questions. Respondents suggested a focus on engaging underrepresented communities and ensuring conservation areas meet diverse needs are emphasised, including transportation solutions for those without cars and language translation for non-English speakers. This could include the implementation of equitable access initiatives.

No revisions to the Vision were suggested by any of the respondents.

PESTLE Factor Summary

(Political, Economic, Sociological, Technological, Legal, Environmental Factors Impacting the Hamilton Conservation Authority)

Political Factors

Regulatory Constraints and Adaptation - Modifications to the Conservation Act limit Hamilton Conservation Authority 's operational scope, particularly around commenting on natural heritage aspects of municipal plans. Adjustments are mandatory, requiring Hamilton Conservation Authority to forgo certain responsibilities, now undertaken by municipalities, while still providing insights on protected land features.

Local Political Support and Citizen Involvement - Despite challenges, there is significant local political backing and growing public participation in conservation discussions. This trend is beneficial for informed decision-making and potentially advantageous for Hamilton Conservation Authority 's strategies.

Taxation and Public Burden - Increased stress on taxpayers, with looming substantial tax hikes, affects public spending and perception. The Hamilton Conservation Authority must balance its levy demands considering public financial strain, while ensuring its regulatory and conservation roles are not compromised.

Public Sentiment and Revenue Impact - Broadly, the Hamilton Conservation Authority is given high marks for how it manages its lands and for the positive revenue impact that arises from the fees charged. There was mention of a degree of public discontent, particularly regarding fees, potentially affecting donations and Hamilton Conservation Authority 's image; this was a singular comment, but should be monitored. Adapting discourse and clarifying Hamilton Conservation Authority 's role, separate from governmental whims, is essential for maintaining community trust and financial stability.

Economic Factors

Inflation and Economic Pressures - Inflation is escalating operational costs, making both internal activities and public access to parks more expensive. Strategic financial planning and alternative revenue streams may help offset these effects. The cost of living and housing affordability in the region affects staff retention (e.g., wages and staffing related to operational projects). The HCA needs to be cognizant of the pressures, balancing the use of flexible work arrangements with the fact that front-line staff cannot work from home. Capital projects are becoming costlier due to inflation, demanding prioritized spending and efficient management of available funds.

Land Use and Environmental Stewardship - Housing demands might pressure land use, potentially conflicting with conservation efforts and increasing flood risks. Collaborative urban planning and advocacy for sustainable development are crucial. Environmental initiatives, like electrifying the fleet, are costly, suggesting a need for phased planning, potential partnerships, or access to dedicated funds. Climate change remediation funds are underutilised, indicating opportunities for additional funding if accessed efficiently.

Operational and Service Adaptability - The "Covid hangover" affects operational norms, suggesting the need for adaptable service models. Passive properties, like trails, present revenue opportunities through tourism and recreational activities. Developing these could help mitigate some budgetary challenges.

Strategic Community and Economic Integration - There's an opportunity to pivot from being seen as development barriers to enablers of sustainable development and ecotourism, leveraging Hamilton Conservation Authority's significant infrastructure management. The growing immigrant population and urbanisation within Hamilton Conservation Authority's catchment area suggest a need to cater to a diverse user base, potentially capitalising on community integration and conservation education.

Sociological Factors

First Nations Engagement - There is a new dimension of involving First Nations in Hamilton Conservation Authority's planning and operations. As Hamilton Conservation Authority navigates this learning curve, there's recognition of the importance of understanding the diverse communities around them and the relationships between various groups. This process is essential for informed decision-making and fostering respect and inclusivity.

Accessibility and Inclusivity - The ageing population (baby boomers) requires considerations for physical accessibility across Hamilton Conservation Authority properties. Additionally, increased immigration and diversity within the community mean Hamilton Conservation Authority must ensure conservation areas are welcoming and informative, possibly necessitating educational initiatives in multiple languages and understanding cultural nuances.

Space Constraints and Infrastructure - Hamilton Conservation Authority experiences increased pressure on its facilities, particularly parking and overall space during peak times, attributed to higher visitation and population growth. This surge necessitates a strategic approach to manage access and preserve the quality of the conservation areas, balancing ecological preservation with public access.

Environmental Conservation Pressures - With rising visitations, there's an increased degradation risk to conservation lands, stressing the need for balance between access and conservation. This situation demands innovative solutions for environmental protection, potentially involving community education and engagement initiatives.

Changing Societal Attitudes - There's a perceived growing sense of entitlement and lower levels of civility among visitors, impacting staff interactions and expectations of the conservation areas. Hamilton Conservation Authority needs to manage these expectations effectively while maintaining a commitment to customer service and education.

Opportunities for Expansion and Engagement - The growing population and heightened environmental awareness present opportunities for Hamilton Conservation Authority, especially among younger generations and new Canadians. There's potential for promotional activities, increased engagement, and expansion of donor projects related to nature

conservation. Effective communication strategies are essential for maintaining engagement and education for visitors.

Strategic Partnerships and Community Integration - Engagement with diverse community groups, including immigrant populations and First Nations, was noted by multiple respondents. Hamilton Conservation Authority has the opportunity to build strategic partnerships with these communities, learning from their environmental protection knowledge and ensuring conservation education is widespread and inclusive.

Technological Factors

Data Analysis and Monitoring - With the aid of advanced technology and analytics, Hamilton Conservation Authority can gather, analyse, and interpret large amounts of data regarding wildlife, water quality, vegetation, soil health, and more. These technologies can detect subtle changes in the ecosystem that might precede significant environmental impacts, allowing for more proactive conservation measures. Predictive analytics could also play a role in forecasting environmental changes and helping Hamilton Conservation Authority make data-driven decisions.

Cybersecurity and Data Privacy - As Hamilton Conservation Authority moves toward technological integration, it will be crucial to invest in cybersecurity measures to protect sensitive environmental data and any personal information of visitors or staff. The integrity and security of their digital systems are paramount.

Automated Maintenance and Reporting - The integration of advanced technology in monitoring tools can lead to the automation of routine tasks. For instance, sensors across parks can monitor parameters like trash levels, water conditions, or air quality, and AI algorithms can prioritise maintenance tasks or even control machinery to address these issues, leading to operational efficiencies and cost savings.

Enhanced Visitor Experience - AI can help personalise the visitor experience at reserves, parks, and conservation areas. For example, virtual assistants and AI-driven information kiosks can provide visitors with interactive learning experiences, offering information tailored to their interests and historical visit patterns. Additionally, mobile apps powered by AI can enhance nature trails, identifying flora and fauna, and providing an immersive learning environment.

Operational Changes and Skill Requirements - With the adoption of new technologies, staff will require training to develop new skills. The organization may need to recruit talent with technical expertise, leading to an evolution in the operational structure and possibly the culture of Hamilton Conservation Authority.

Stakeholder Engagement and Communication - Technology provides platforms and channels through which Hamilton Conservation Authority can engage with stakeholders, from social media to virtual town halls, enhancing transparency, and allowing for broader public participation in conservation initiatives.

Legal Factors

Liabilities and Insurance - There's a substantial focus on liabilities, ranging from insurance claims due to accidents on Hamilton Conservation Authority properties to broader concerns around severe weather events due to climate change. The organization needs to ensure they have adequate insurance coverage and risk management strategies, reflecting potentially higher ongoing costs.

Property and Environmental Legislation - As a landowner, Hamilton Conservation Authority anticipates higher demands on their properties, with growing public use leading to more liabilities and expectations. Upcoming environmental legislation, particularly around climate change and conservation, could redefine stewardship roles and responsibilities, possibly leading to increased legal responsibilities and partnership limitations.

Public Relations Best Practices - Emphasis on staff training signifies a preventive legal approach, ensuring front-end employees are equipped to handle issues sensibly and empathetically. Sharing best practices, particularly regarding trail risk management, is seen as crucial in maintaining low legal exposure.

Environmental Factors

Climate Change and Extreme Weather Events - The Authority is grappling with the immediate and future impacts of climate change, which manifest in more frequent extreme weather events like storms, floods, and heatwaves. These phenomena strain resources as they deal with trail repairs, land maintenance, and water management, particularly concerning flood control.

Climate change is extending the recreation season, which, while beneficial in one aspect, puts additional pressure on land and resources. Transitioning to climate-resilient infrastructure and practices, including the use of electric / hydrogen vehicles and heat pumps, requires significant investment and operational shifts.

Land Management and Biodiversity - The threat of invasive species is escalating, partly fuelled by a changing climate. These species undermine local ecosystems' health, and their management is both crucial and resource-intensive.

There's a need for strategic land acquisition to support biodiversity, with a focus on creating robust, interconnected habitats. This strategy also includes enhancing public access and trails while ensuring protection from overuse and damage.

Public Health and Safety - Emerging public health issues linked to the environment, such as poor air quality from fires and the spread of diseases through ticks and mosquitoes, demand attention and resources. The Authority has to balance the need for public enjoyment of the lands with health and safety precautions, potentially leading to operational challenges.

Infrastructure and Resources - There's a growing necessity for durable, climate-resilient infrastructure to minimise constant repairs and resource allocation following environmental wear and tear, especially from flooding. Investments are essential in low-emission equipment and practices to reduce the Authority's carbon footprint.

Community Engagement and Education - There is an observed rise in climate anxiety among the public, leading to disengagement or a sense of hopelessness. The Authority plays a vital role in education and engagement, providing reliable information, and encouraging active participation in environmental conservation.

Strengths of the Hamilton Conservation Authority

Many strengths were identified. Below are the top 6 that respondents noted:

1. **Agility and Responsiveness:** The Hamilton Conservation Authority boasts a small, flexible, and mobile team that can adapt quickly, ensuring swift reactions to changing conditions or needs. The pivot to virtual meeting technology during the pandemic was an oft-cited example. Also, the HCA is quick to respond to requests for assistance or in seeing opportunities to help others, such as doing water sampling for the City of Hamilton.
2. **Financial Self-Sustainability:** It is financially self-reliant (beyond the municipal levy), largely due to efficiently managed conservation areas and facilities. Despite its smaller size compared to other conservation areas in Ontario, it generates significant revenue beyond the municipal levy. Respondents from Conservation Ontario and other conservation authorities indicated that the HCA is seen to be a leader in this area.
3. **Diverse Recreational and Conservation Areas:** The authority offers a variety of well-maintained areas, services, and experiences for visitors. Its conservation spaces are kept in better condition compared to others, with clear trail maps and well-maintained infrastructure. People indicated that the state of the trails, the infrastructure, and the accessibility of the conservation lands were key strengths.
4. **Innovative Technologies and Programs:** Innovations, such as advance day pass purchases and automated gates, enhance visitor experience and help manage access and revenue. There is a focus on technology in managing facilities and services.
5. **Customer Service and Public Engagement:** Staff are recognized for their professionalism, client orientation, and community engagement. They are seen as passionate, dedicated, and entrepreneurial, contributing to a positive workplace environment.
6. **Organizational Profile, Community Engagement and Educational Programs:** The Hamilton Conservation Authority has strong ties with annual pass holders and engages in initiatives with the HPL to tackle socio-economic barriers. They also feature outdoor education programs, partnerships with schools, and a significant volunteer base, all aimed at fostering environmental awareness.

Weaknesses of the Hamilton Conservation Authority

Again, a number of weaknesses were identified. Below are the top 4:

1. **Employee Recruitment and Retention:** There's a high reliance on key individuals, creating a burnout risk. Issues with staff retention have been noted, with a more frequent need to review compensation, internal hierarchy, career growth opportunities and enhance internal recognition and promotion to help prevent loss of employees.
2. **Technology and Modernization:** The Hamilton Conservation Authority has been slow to adopt new technology (both in the office and in the field), though efforts are being made to modernise through an IT strategy. Technology used in the field was seen as an opportunity to enhance the public's experience in a user-friendly manner. Within the HCA offices there was a sense that office furniture, computers, etc could be / should be upgraded.
3. **Engagement and Public Perception:** There are gaps in Indigenous engagement, though some steps towards improvement are being taken. For instance, efforts are being made to include First Nations in the preparation of this strategic plan project. Beyond that, a number of people suggested that the broader public doesn't know what the HCA is all about, who runs it, what its mandate is, etc. Efforts to improve the public's understanding of the HCA's roles and responsibilities was suggested on a few different occasions.
4. **Social Media and Online Presence:** The Hamilton Conservation Authority's online presence was noted as being effective but pales somewhat in comparison with other nature-focused entities. With online presence there can be better and broader understanding of what the HCA is all about and its role in maintaining the watershed.

Strategic Elements of Past Strategic Plans

The following 5 areas are the focus of the immediate past strategic plan. Respondents were asked if these 5 areas provide clarity such that they should also be part of the upcoming strategic plan:

1. Water management
2. Natural heritage conservation
3. Conservation area experience
4. Educational and environmental awareness
5. Organizational excellence

Stable Strategic Areas:

There's a consensus that the five current strategic areas remain relevant but might require redefinition, combining and / or reorganisation.

Strategic Area Realignment:

Some propose collapsing the current strategic areas into fewer categories for efficiency, suggesting that certain sections could be combined, such as:

- Aligning Environmental Awareness more closely with Natural Heritage Conservation
- Merging Educational and Environmental Awareness with Conservation Area Experience
- Watershed Health, Land Management/Natural Heritage, Conservation Area Experience are the 3 key areas

Land Acquisition and Conservation:

There's a strong emphasis on continuing land acquisition to preserve natural heritage, with an approach favouring passive over active use. Participants note challenges due to political pressures and limitations from recent legislation (Bill 229), which restricts the Authority's influence in certain areas. It was noted that land acquisition is not a mandatory program or service under the *CA Act*; it is a 'nice to have'.

Thoughts from the Strategic Planning Steering Committee on the Strategic Areas:

The committee members stated that the way the HCA operates and reports on its activities aligns with the 5 strategic areas. Some redefinition/rebranding and merging educational and Environmental Awareness makes the most sense, going forward. Focus on improving nature on our lands / watershed health, supporting sustainable growth through our planning and permitting, connecting people to nature through our conservation areas and educational experiences and organizational excellence through enhanced marketing and communications, HR programs, relationships with stakeholders and current and innovative technology, business systems and diverse funding sources.

Therefore, the essence of the five Strategic Elements will remain in the strategic plan and the total number of strategic areas may be adjusted prior to the finalisation of the plan in 2024.

Potential Strategies / Strategic Opportunities Suggested

1. **Organizational Review and Efficiency:** Consideration should be given to assess and identify areas where improvements can be made to enhance productivity, streamline operations, and enhance internal reviews and programs for employee retention. There's a need for staff adequacy and succession planning, ensuring the right talents are in place and operations are sustainable.
2. **Land Acquisition and Management:** Prioritising land acquisition is crucial to conserve more natural spaces which will require funding for acquiring any available land suitable for conservation purposes.
3. **Partnerships and Community Engagement:** Building external partnerships is key as the authority cannot work in isolation. Collaborative efforts can enhance resources and effectiveness. There's a strong emphasis on First Nations engagement, recognizing the need for deeper involvement and relationship-building, which could entail budget implications. As well, strategic partnerships with other agencies could help with project funding.
4. **Revenue and Resources:** Thought should be given to appropriate resource allocation, especially towards areas that generate revenue. Unconventional or untapped revenue sources should be explored.
5. **Public Visibility and Education:** Increasing public awareness through different approaches, like meeting people where they are, and educating on specific topics is advised.
6. **Innovation and Environmental Protection:** The role of the authority as an environmental protector is emphasised, with a need to showcase how they execute this role. Driving innovation, focusing on climate adaptation, resilience, and providing science-based information for decision-making is recommended. There's an acknowledgment of the role of social sciences in conservation efforts.
7. **Data Management and Strategy:** Conducting regular natural area inventories, updating databases in collaboration with cities and clubs, and having strategies in place for biodiversity and invasive species are integral parts of the authority's responsibility. There's a mention of making certain data open to the public while protecting sensitive information about species and habitats. The importance of historical data is acknowledged, helping

guide comprehensive watershed health strategies, including water quality strategies in place for over a decade.

8. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives:** Implementing programs that promote diversity both within the organization and in community engagement activities, including outreach to various groups.
9. **Promotion and Brand Awareness:** Distinguishing the Hamilton Conservation Authority from city governance, increasing public engagement through various channels (newsletters, events, displays), and driving brand awareness by highlighting the Hamilton Conservation Authority 's role and accomplishments.
10. **Natural Heritage Promotion:** Emphasising the protection of land for public trust, stewardship, restoration, and increasing the narrative around the natural heritage through storytelling, signage, and information dissemination. Considering new offerings for immersive nature experiences and utilising Citizen Science for community involvement.
11. **Technology and Data Transparency:** Modernising technology use (e.g., for flood warnings), opening up data access to the public, and addressing feedback received through various channels to improve the conservation area experience.
12. **Climate Change Leadership:** Taking an active role in climate change initiatives, potentially re-evaluating watershed management and engaging in projects that secure funding for climate change response (e.g., Saltfleet wetlands project).

Appendix A – Data Gathering Interview Guide

1. The mission of the Hamilton Conservation is “to lead in the conservation of our watershed and connect people to nature”. What are 2-3 ways in which the HCA excelled in meeting its mission over the past few years?
2. The vision of HCA is “A healthy watershed for everyone?” – are there some new and different ways that the HCA could be working in the next 5 years to help ensure you move closer to vision being achieved.
3. One of the important activities to consider before building a new strategic plan is what is happening in the environment. Please comment on the following factors (called PESTLE) and how they might affect HCA in the next five years.

Political: municipal tax base; environmental regulations; governmental decisions

Economic: Economic growth / decline in the region; interest rates; inflation; wages; working hours, cost of living; etc

Sociological: Cultural norms and expectations; population growth rates; age distribution; career attitudes; health and safety; etc

Technological: New technologies are continually emerging (AI), and the rate of change itself is increasing. How will this affect HCA?

Legal: Changes to legislation impacting service delivery; employment

Environmental: Weather, climate change, environmental policies

4. What are some of the greatest strengths of the HCA today (things the organization does particularly well; qualities that separate it from other conservations or other organizations)?
5. What are some of the weaknesses of the HCA today – what it does not do particularly well – or where it falls behind other like organizations?
6. Are there some opportunities that HCA should really be grabbing a hold of or addressing in this five-year strategic plan? What is your rationale?
7. Are there some threats that HCA should address in this strategic plan – to minimise the risks they impose?
8. Strategic plans typically focus on the “do different” items that the organization needs to put special focus to overcome weaknesses and build

on strengths and opportunities. When it comes to each of these areas - is there an important do different action that should be considered for this strategic plan? See current strategic plan for definitions of each strategic area:

- a. Water management
- b. Natural heritage conservation
- c. Conservation area experience
- d. Educational and environmental awareness
- e. Organizational excellence

9. What other potential strategies or tactics should be considered in this plan?

10. What final comments or suggestions do you have for the Board and senior staff to consider when drafting this strategic plan?