

# Report

**TO:** Conservation Advisory Board

**FROM:** Lisa Burnside, Chief Administrative Officer (CAO)

**RECOMMENDED & PREPARED BY:** Gord Costie, Director, Conservation Area Service  
Matthew Hall, Director, Capital Projects & Strateg Services  
T. Scott Peck, MCIP, RPP, Deputy CAO/Director, Watershed Planning & Engineering

**DATE:** September 19, 2019

**RE:** HCA Conservation Area - Visitor Management & Vehicle Parking Review

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**THAT the Conservation Advisory Board recommend to the Board of Directors:**

**THAT Staff be directed to implement the following directions outlined in the report titled “HCA Conservation Area - Visitor Management & Vehicle Parking Review”;**

**Recommendation #1 – HCA staff implement immediate parking enhancement opportunities at Artaban Road, Tiffany Falls, Devil’s Punchbowl, Tew Falls and Westfield Heritage Village to optimize number of parking spaces, traffic flow and signage;**

**Recommendation #2- HCA staff undertake steps to consider expansion of the Artaban road parking lot through a Niagara Escarpment development permit;**

**Recommendation #3 – HCA staff undertake steps to establish an interim parking lot and trail connection to the Dofasco Trail for the Devil’s Punchbowl at the Saltfleet Conservation Area;**

**Recommendation #4 – HCA staff further examine and explore additional options for safe visitor access to Tiffany Falls;**

**Recommendation #5 – HCA staff work with various agencies and partners such as City of Hamilton, Tourism Hamilton, Hamilton/Burlington Trails Council etc. to encourage transportation alternatives;**

**Recommendation #6 – HCA develop a marketing campaign and website enhancements to increase turnover and shorter term stays at areas with limited parking and encourage visitation to less frequented areas and when there is capacity;**

**Recommendation #7 – HCA staff ensure that the approved 10 year Masterplan Strategy incorporates detailed review of parking at all areas through the Master planning process.**

## **BACKGROUND**

In February 2019, a report titled “HCA Conservation Area Vehicle Parking Review” was presented to the Conservation Advisory Board with the following recommendation **“THAT HCA staff be directed to undertake the parking inventory as detailed in the report titled “HCA Conservation Area Vehicle Parking Study”, dated February 1, 2019.”** This recommendation was endorsed by the Conservation Advisory Board and approved by the Board of Directors at their March 7, 2019 meeting.

As noted in the report, the parking review will assess the supply at individual HCA areas and identify capacity gaps, provide potential recommendations for parking strategies that support these HCA areas while conserving the natural features of the area, and building upon the existing parking system.

A project steering committee comprised of senior HCA staff was struck and has met multiple times in the past months as part of finalizing the parking inventory assessment and obtained input from Conservation Area staff. From this work, the steering committee had identified steps that had already been taken to address visitor and parking issues by way of the following initiatives:

1. Implementing the shuttle service at Christie Lake to service Spencer Gorge Conservation Area on weekends April through October and examining each year how to make this more effective
2. Utilizing shuttles to bring visitors to the Telling Tales Festival event at Westfield Heritage Conservation Area by the third party organizers
3. Having HCA staff on site to meet with visitors to provide trail etiquette and information regarding other conservation areas to visit.

4. Increasing posting of trail signage and brochures highlighting the need to stay on the trail for visitor safety and conservation of the associated natural areas.
5. Working through HCA website and social media directing people to authorized access points and providing visitor education.
6. Working with the City of Hamilton regarding municipal No Parking and No Stopping signage and associated municipal by-law enforcement.
7. Installing automated access gates at conservation areas and installing trail and vehicle counters to provide information regarding the number of visitors accessing areas.
8. Allocating capital budget dollars to maintain internal HCA roads through tar and chip and/or paving.
9. Allocating capital budget dollars to improve various HCA parking areas with site specific measures such as clean up, line painting, creation of overflow parking and/or expansion
10. Re-opening both the Merrick lot and Artaban lot in the Dundas Valley

Following the review of work already undertaken, the committee then determined the next outcomes to be taken to further improve the situation. This report highlights five key visitor management and parking program areas with associated action items to be implemented.

#### Key Visitor Management and Parking Program Areas

1. Identifying High Use Conservation Areas through Parking review metrics
2. Addressing High Use Conservation Areas with Visitor and Parking Issues
3. Optimizing Mass Transit and Non-motorized Vehicle Access to Conservation Areas
4. Marketing and Communication
5. Master Planning and Operational Improvements

This review was undertaken with an understanding of our role as the area's leading environmental agency and our role as a landowner. The lands owned by the Hamilton Conservation Authority contain physical features, flora and fauna of national, provincial and local significance and these lands were acquired to preserve these features while

developing these lands as appropriate for passive recreation and environmental education. In developing the five key program areas with the associated action items, the first priority is ensuring the environmental features of the lands are maintained and that the Hamilton Conservation Authority is leading by example as it relates to the management of our lands while ensuring positive and safe visitor experiences.

## **STAFF COMMENT**

As noted in the background section above, five key visitor management and parking program areas have been identified with associated information and action items.

### **1. Identification of High Use Conservation Areas through Parking Review Metrics**

HCA has approximately parking capacity for 7,322 vehicles in its parking areas, as shown in the table below with the vast majority at Christie Lake, our main event area and shuttle hub location for Spencer Gorge that can handle large numbers of cars.

Our major conservation areas generally have adequate capacity for current visitation, except for certain special events at Westfield Heritage Village.

2018 data from autogate and pay and display machines at our unattended parking areas demonstrate the high volume at three smaller parking facilities which tend to be associated with waterfalls or iconic escarpment areas. It is important to note that these figures do not include HCA annual vehicle pass holders or unpaid vehicles. Parking tickets issued in 2018 by City of Hamilton bylaw for road side waterfall areas also demonstrate pressure these areas experience. Ridge Road has armour stone along the road way to help prevent parking and likely results in the lower number of tickets, and staff also report visitors utilizing parking at the Devil's Punchbowl market and walking along Ridge Road.

Staff note through site visits and maintenance that Tiffany Falls, Devil's Punchbowl and Artaban Road are extremely busy on weekends and holidays throughout the year and vehicle congestion issues are common. Further, staff working in these areas have noticed a high turn-over at these locations as the hikes to the waterfall attractions are very short and staff report that through interaction with visitors that many are unaware of the Bruce Trail connection for Tiffany and Sherman Falls and greater connections to the Dundas Valley.

While Spencer Gorge is handled by the shuttle on weekends and public holidays during the operating season, staff report parking pressures at Tew Falls mid-week during the fall leaf colours in October.

<b>CONSERVATION AREA or PARKING LOT NAME</b>	<b>PARKING SPACES</b>	<b>AUTOGATE PAID VEHICLES</b>	<b>CITY BY-LAW PARKING TICKETS</b>
Fletcher Creek Ecological Preserve	12	no gate or pay machine	
Beverly Swamp	14	no gate or pay machine	
Tiffany Falls	20	10,314	378
Artaban Road	21	4616	775
Devil's Punch Bowl	22	10,433	186
Monarch Trail	22	367	
Chippawa Rail Trail	23	no gate or pay machine	
Iroquoia Heights	25	no gate or pay machine	
Borer's Falls	27	no gate or pay machine	
Felker's Falls	30	no gate or pay machine	
Dundas Valley HCA workshop & area	30	350	
Merrick Orchard	36	1908	
Hermitage	40	4226	
Hamilton to Brantford Rail Trail - West	42	no gate or pay machine	
Eramosa Karst	60	912	
Crooks' Hollow	86	941	
Spencer Gorge	248	23,162	2200
Dundas Valley Main Parking	265	4816	
Westfield Heritage Village	300	Staffed gate	
Valens Lake	354	Staffed gate	
Fifty Point	862	Staffed gate	
Christie Lake	4,783	Staffed gate	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7,322</b>		

- **Paid Vehicles only entering through unattended parking areas, does not count HCA annual pass holders or unpaid visits**
- **Spencer Gorge parking lots are closed weekends and public holidays during shuttle operations**

## 2. Addressing High Use Conservation Areas with Visitor and Parking Issues

As part of the development of the parking inventory and through an understanding of current conservation area operations, Spencer Gorge Conservation Area, Tiffany Falls and Artaban Road in the Dundas Valley Conservation Area as well as the Devil's Punchbowl Conservation Area have been identified as high use areas with associated parking issues. Westfield Heritage Village Conservation Area also experiences parking issues during some special events.

### **Spencer Gorge / Tew Falls**

- Visitation and parking issues at the Spencer Gorge are being addressed on weekends and public holidays through the high operating season through the operation of the visitor shuttle and partnership with Park Bus. The Board of Directors have provided direction to staff that this shuttle operation will continue as part of the annual operations for this conservation area.
- In season, during the week, Tew Falls parking area receives significant visitation and handles the bulk of vehicles for Spencer Gorge. Staff have identified that improvements to this lot would optimize traffic flow, number of parking spaces and visitor experience. This work could require an Environmental Impact Study (EIS), NEC review and approval based on final scale and scope of enhancements.

### **Tiffany Falls**

- Tiffany Falls is a highly visited area that is serviced by a small parking lot. It is important that HCA continue to work collaboratively with City bylaw enforcement to control and enforce no parking regulations to address spillover parking along Wilson Street. While there are no options available to physically enlarge the existing parking lot, some measures can be taken on site to optimize the lot to enhance traffic flow and angular parking.
- Additional options will need to be explored for this area, bearing in mind the single trail and viewing platform and overall limited space and capacity of the area. Several options for further detailed consideration and investigation have initially been identified to include:
  1. Continue with operation of the existing parking area with an increased focus on promoting short stays, increased visitor turnover and off-peak visitation. This would also involve signing the area to advise that picnics are not permitted in this location and reviewing photography permits and parking access for Bruce Trail members.
  2. Promote walk-in access through nearby HSR bus stop and Bruce Trail.
  3. Potential for the development of a new larger parking lot for this site on HCA lands adjacent to Tiffany Falls located north of Wilson Street with

frontage on Lower Lions Club Road. There is additional work to be completed to determine the feasibility of this proposal. This includes:

- i. Completion of an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) to determine if it is acceptable according to HCA and City of Hamilton requirements to develop a parking lot on the lands as the majority of the area is designated as an Environmentally Significant Area. This work would take approximately 1-year to complete and would require the services of an outside consultant.
- ii. The subject lands are located within the Niagara Escarpment Plan area, within the Protection Area designation and a Development Permit would be required for the development of a parking lot in this area. The above noted EIS would form part of this application.
- iii. A review of traffic issues and pedestrian crossing requirements would need to be completed and reviewed with the City of Hamilton. Wilson Street is a major thoroughfare within the City and specifically Ancaster with a 70km/hr speed limit at the Tiffany Falls area

#### **Artaban Road Parking Lot**

- This parking lot receives significant visitation, particularly now that Lions Club road has been signed as No Parking. Its popularity is associated with visitation with Sherman Falls which is not owned by HCA but is located adjacent to HCA lands and associated trail system. It is important that HCA continue to work collaboratively with City bylaw enforcement to control and enforce No Parking regulations to address spillover parking on Lions Club Road.
- Staff have identified that improvements to this lot would optimize traffic flow, number of parking spaces and visitor experience and could be promoted further as an offsite parking location for Tiffany Falls for visitors to access by walking the Bruce Trail connection.
- There is the potential to formally expand the parking lot at Artaban Road adjacent to the existing HCA parking lot. There is additional work to be completed to determine the feasibility of this proposal. This includes:
  - i. Completion of an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) to determine if it is acceptable according to HCA and City of Hamilton requirements to develop a parking lot on the lands as the majority of the area is designated as an Environmentally Significant Area. This work would take approximately 1-year to complete and would require the services of an outside consultant.
  - ii. The subject lands are located within the Niagara Escarpment Plan area, within the Protection Area designation and a

Development Permit would be required for the development of a parking lot in this area. The above noted EIS would form part of this application.

### **Devil's Punchbowl**

- Auto gates installed in this parking lot have demonstrated its popularity and high utilization. Staff have identified that improvements to this lot could optimize traffic flow, number of parking spaces and visitor experience
- While the current lot would benefit from improvements, there are opportunities for additional parking to be created within the adjacent lands that comprise part of the Saltfleet Conservation Area to provide additional parking on an interim basis until the design work for the wetland is completed in 2020 and Master Plan which is timed for 2021. Subject to the above, on the east side of First Road East with an existing driveway, a parking area and a trail could be created to connect to the Dofasco Trail. Signage and promotional materials would be needed to inform the public of this option.
- In the longer term, as additional lands are acquired, there is potential for a gateway to service the Devil's Punchbowl area.

### **Westfield Heritage Village Conservation Area**

- Staff have identified that improvements to this lot would optimize traffic flow, number of parking spaces and visitor experience
- Lack of sufficient event parking at certain special events at Westfield have been identified as an issue to address parking and crowd management.
- Staff are bringing forward a separate report entitled "2020 Christmas Ticket Purchase Pilot" for consideration on managing parking and visitation during high volume special events for the area.

### **3. Optimizing Mass Transit and Non-motorized Vehicle Access to Conservation Areas**

- As noted in earlier comments above, efforts have been made to encourage visitors to utilize services such as Park Bus or through public transit as available or regional and local trail and cycling networks. These efforts should be enhanced to promote transit through municipal transit (HSR), enhancing as appropriate trail connections and regional trail and road hiking and cycling networks to reduce parking demand
- Through the parking review, staff have identified three areas with HSR connections

### **Parking Areas with HRS stop within 500 metres**



<b>CONSERVATION AREA</b>	<b>BUS NUMBER</b>	<b>BUS NAME</b>	<b>STOP LOCATION</b>
Dundas Valley	5	DELAWARE	MAIN at EWEN
Felker's Falls	43	STONE CHURCH	PARAMOUNT opposite AUCKLAND And PARAMOUNT at APEX
Tiffany Falls	5	DELAWARE	At 1039 WILSON

- Staff have identified that it would be beneficial to inquire with HSR the possibility of moving the bus stop location on Wilson Street closer to the Tiffany Falls parking lot
- The overall work of promoting transit and local trails will involve a high degree of public education and is also part of the action items noted in Section 4, Marketing and Communications.

#### 4. Marketing and Communication

- For specific high use areas, identify the closest off-site parking areas, linked by trails and create walking tour suggestions for visitors to access the areas from a little further away, and highlighting places and sights along the way, to make the hike more appealing. For example, accessing the Devil's Punchbowl by getting there along the Dofasco 2000 Trail, seeing the boardwalk section through the Vinemount Swamp and other sights along the escarpment brow.
- Increase and improve on-site messaging. Signage could be created along the lines of "Found it a little busy here today? Try visiting during the week or earlier in the morning for a more secluded experience." This can also be encouraged on Instagram and Facebook.
- Improve website messaging with peak times and suggested times to visit for the best experience and also add parking information to each of the affected area's section of the website.
- A brochure could be created for all of our East Mountain areas (Devil's Punchbowl, Saltfleet, East Mountain Trail Loop, Dofasco Trail, Karst, etc.), both for area information and to communicate the needed messages in these areas.
- Update information on our Trip Advisor and Google pages and as well as Waterfalls Hamilton website through the City of Hamilton.
- Automatic Gates and Pay and Display Machines – a new ticket with multi conservation area access is a new option. There are 10 locations that have this feature for 2019, with additional areas proposed in 2020. This feature can be

marketed once all machines are operational. This option allows for a visitor to go to multiple locations for one daily price and the idea is that it will encourage shorter term stays as visitors can attend multiple locations thereby increasing turnover.

## 5. Master Planning and Operational Improvements

- In addition to the above noted items that have either been implemented or will be implemented within existing programs or through further site specific considerations as appropriate, there are issues that require further consideration which can be identified through the development of master plans/management plans or through conservation area operations. This would include such items as:
  - i. Continued implementation of the HCA's auto-gates and pay and display for parking areas.
  - ii. Refinement of parking use and parking lot configuration to maximize the area available for parking within existing parking lots.
  - iii. Visitor and parking management through such initiatives as a limited number and specific date ticketing system for events and programs.
  - iv. Continued work with our municipal partners regarding "No Stopping" and "No Parking" signs and enforcement in these areas. It is important to note that the HCA can only manage issues on HCA lands, issues related to the use of municipal roads and road right of ways is the responsibility of the affected municipality.
  - v. Development of master plans and management plans to guide the management of our conservation areas with an eye to anticipate long term visitation trends with associated infrastructure requirements.
  - vi. Including information within master plans as guidance regarding the use of conservation areas and trail classification to better understand how visitors can impact the natural features of the lands and also how the number of visitors can impact visitor experience.
  - vii. Providing direction regarding the need for continued land acquisition to ensure the conservation of our watersheds natural features while providing passive recreation opportunities. The Land Securement Strategy will also provide direction in this regard.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN LINKAGE**

The initiative refers directly to the HCA Strategic Plan 2019 - 2023:

- **Strategic Priority Area – Organizational Excellence**
  - Initiatives - Update our website to increase access to information and services
- **Strategic Priority Area – Conservation Area Experience**
  - Initiatives – Develop visitor and parking management strategies to support conservation areas for sustainable recreation, education and tourism
  - Initiatives - Continue to expand installation of automatic gates across our conservation areas
  - Initiatives - Work with partners such as the City of Hamilton, the Cootes to Escarpment Ecopark System, and the Hamilton Burlington Trails Council, to enhance trail networks for recreational uses

## **AGENCY COMMENTS**

Program implementation will require working with partner agencies such as the City of Hamilton, Tourism Hamilton and the Niagara Escarpment Commission. This work would include no parking and no stopping signage as appropriate, parking enforcement on City roadways, working with City of Hamilton Natural Heritage Planners regarding development within environmentally significant areas, promotion and visitor education with Tourism Hamilton as well as working through development permits for new or expanded parking areas with the Niagara Escarpment Commission.

## **LEGAL/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Implementation of this program work will be incorporated into departmental work plans with associated approved operating and capital budget resources being utilized as approved and allocated annually. Some parking lot enhancements can be undertaken in 2019 through the 2019 capital budget as resources and time permits.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Visitor and parking management will continue to be a main program area for the HCA into the foreseeable future. The recommendations flowing from the five program areas outlined in this report will continue to be the primary focus of our efforts to preserve the natural resources on our conservation area lands while ensuring a positive visitor experience.