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## Executive Summary

### ***Vision Statement***

*To be one of Conservation Halton's regionally significant Niagara Escarpment Parks, protecting and sustaining the unique interior forest habitat and unique escarpment environment, while providing excellence in high quality educational and outdoor passive recreational experiences through enhanced facilities and amenities.*

### ***Significant Attributes of Hilton Falls Conservation Area***

Hilton Falls Conservation Area possesses an impressive array of natural and cultural heritage features including:

- Together with the Halton Regional Forest Complex, it is part of one of the largest remaining publically owned natural areas in Southern Ontario;
- 655.5 hectares of forest including 410 hectares of interior forest with 275 hectares of deep interior forest comprising 67 different habitat types, expansive wetlands and escarpment rim features;
- A network of 35 kilometres of hiking, cross country skiing, and cycling trails, featuring 10 kilometres of the Bruce Trail;
- Part of the Niagara Escarpment UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve and identified as a Natural Environmental Park under the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System;
- Identification of the Hilton Falls Complex ESA - the largest ESA in Halton Region that includes headwaters of the Sixteen Mile Creek and extensive wooded areas creating an outstanding natural area;
- Identification as a Provincially Significant Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI) representing the Halton Forest South Life Science ANSI feature;
- Identification as Provincially Significant Wetlands for the Halton Escarpment Provincially Significant Wetland Complex;
- Over 699 plant species(53 rare, 127 uncommon), 152 bird species (22 rare, 38 uncommon), 30 mammal species (3 rare, 2 uncommon), 10 reptiles (2 rare, 1 uncommon), and 17 amphibians (3 rare, 5 uncommon) can be found in the conservation area and the immediate surrounding area;(rare and uncommon in Halton Region)
- Protected habitat for 12 species at risk as well as 5 globally rare and 9 provincially rare habitat types, and ancient Eastern White Cedars;
- Lowland areas containing a variety of wetland communities, including swamps, open aquatic, and shallow marsh vegetative communities;
- Remnant ruins of an 1840's saw mill archaeological site
- A major 1970's flood control reservoir that flows downstream into Kelso Reservoir;
- A modest visitor centre offering a variety of visitor information, orientation and interpretation with over 55,000 visitors in 2010.

- Existing natural heritage features provide the equivalent of \$4.4 million in ecosystem services annually.

### **Existing Policy Framework**

The *Master Plan for Hilton Falls Conservation Area* builds on and supports existing Conservation Halton and provincial policy documents including the *Conservation Halton Strategic Plan (2009)*, *Halton Escarpment Parks – A Limestone Legacy plan (2007)* and the *Niagara Escarpment Plan (2005)*.

The *Limestone Legacy* document outlines a draft strategy to protect and enhance Conservation Halton's system of escarpment conservation areas through a unique partnership between Halton Region and Conservation Halton

Within the provincial *Niagara Escarpment Plan (2005)*, Hilton Falls is designated as a Natural Environment Park that accommodates activities including high quality, low to moderate intensity recreation such as hiking, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, mountain biking, nature viewing and picnicking.

### **Summary of Significant Issues and Challenges**

**Financial Constraints:** Over the past 20 years, with changes in government and priorities, Conservation Halton's funding for conservation area development and enhancement has almost disappeared. Therefore, Conservation Halton has been primarily using conservation area revenues to offset operating expenses with limited funds for basic capital maintenance work, new facilities or tools to monitor environmental impact. Currently there is no real capital funding source. This limited funding has resulted in the deterioration of natural heritage features, facilities and amenities as well as the quality of the visitor experience. Limited funding threatens Conservation Halton's ability to continue to protect and maintain, let alone improve or enhance, the conservation area.

Hilton Falls Conservation Area, along with the other Conservation Halton conservation areas, suffers from the impacts of severely limited tax-supported funding. Funding models in many other Conservation Authorities in Southern Ontario include regional, municipal and/or provincial tax levy support. Additionally, development charges permit fees and other associated development fees are charged against Conservation Halton for conservation area capital development projects. Other park agencies in the region are normally exempt from these fees and charges.

**Growth in Visitation:** Over the last five years, Conservation Halton conservation areas have experienced 9.4 percent annual increase in visitation, while the regional population has grown at a rate of 4.5 percent over the same period. This growth trend is projected to continue, if not accelerate over the next ten years. This growth represents regional resident's positive attitude towards participation in healthy-lifestyle pursuits and interest in conservation, but also represents a threat to the sensitive natural ecology of the site unless properly managed and serviced with the appropriate facilities.

**Natural Heritage Protection:** Hilton Falls Conservation Area's unique and diverse natural heritage system is generally well protected and secure. However, some deterioration was identified at certain heavily used locations along the trails system, highlighting the need for stronger monitoring and protection measures, especially in light of the population and visitation projections.

**Cultural Heritage Protection:** There is one registered archaeological site within the Hilton Falls Conservation Area: the area around the 1840's sawmill ruin at the falls site.

**Visitor Experience:** While the natural and cultural features of the Hilton Falls Conservation Area are spectacular and unique, the present built amenities, facilities and infrastructure are inadequate to serve the projected growth in visitation. While visitors currently enjoy their experience at the conservation area, continued growth will put facilities beyond the capacity they were built for, which will detract from the quality of the visitor experience.

**Education and Programming:** The educational programming at Hilton Falls Conservation Area is not well developed. The consultation process indicated interest and potential for Hilton Falls Conservation Area to become a leading site for outdoor recreation education particularly related to trails activities such as hiking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing as well as education focusing on trails systems management for these forms of recreation.

### ***Recommended Policies***

This master plan has been developed to support the Hilton Falls Conservation Area as a significant regional destination for local visitors and tourists. This master plan:

- Ensures protection and enhancement of the natural heritage and cultural spaces of the site;
- Promotes environmental values, excellence in education, healthy lifestyles and outdoor recreation;
- Prescribes a workable visitor impact management (VIM) strategy that addresses the expected increased visitation and any accompanying potential impacts;
- Specifies development requirements and standards that meet the appropriate level of design excellence in high quality educational, interpretive and recreational facilities, programs and amenities; and;
- Outlines a realistic financial management strategy that defines funding and revenue generation requirements, potential partnerships, management and operational costs and that aims at ensuring long-term viability.

### ***Highlights of the Development Proposal***

The master plan identifies a range of new facilities to provide enhanced natural heritage protection, visitor experience, amenities, educational and interpretive opportunities and recreational conveniences. Financial and environmental sustainability are defining and, in some cases, limiting factors in the proposed list of master plan recommendations. Some of the proposed development may be exempted from requiring a Niagara Escarpment Development Permit in accordance with section 5.41 of Ontario Regulation 828/90. The main elements of the master plan are summarized as follows:

- A state-of-the-art renovation and addition to the existing visitor centre to accommodate the Hilton Falls Conservation Area's expanded role in relation to information, orientation, education and interpretation.
- A system of entrance, directional, interpretive and other signage that is consistently branded across all Conservation Halton conservation areas and standardized to meet accessibility, readability, risk management and marketing objectives.
- An enhanced, sustainably-designed system of small-scale roads and parking areas that promotes safety and security for visitors and a positive sense of arrival, and which is tastefully designed to harmonize with the natural setting of the conservation area.

- Upgrade existing access route and parking areas; resurfacing existing parking lot and access road, add a grass paver system to the overflow parking areas, add automatic gate at kiosk for pass holders.
- Site technology upgrades, including telephone and video surveillance (future).
- Accessibility upgrades for all buildings and pathways to meet the *Accessibility for Ontarians for Disabilities Act (AODA)* build environment standards.
- Trail system improvements to ensure protection and enhancement of the natural heritage system including some re-routing, re-construction and closure where appropriate.
- Provision of rental equipment such as cross-country skis and snowshoes.
- Redevelop the existing interpretive lookouts and stairs at the falls.
- An upgraded standardized palette of day-use passive recreation amenities such as 100 sq. meter picnic shelters and additional site furniture.
- Site services upgrades including electrical service and wastewater treatment that use sustainable technologies that demonstrate respect for environmental values associated with the site.
- Consideration of acquisition of additional lands for future expansion of the administrative facilities, recreational programming sites and natural heritage features and requirements.

### **Overall Capital Development Costs**

Overall capital development cost for the build out of the proposed master plan for Hilton Falls Conservation Area amounts to approximately \$5.94 million over a ten-year period. A generalized breakdown of this amount is summarized below.

Signage	\$ 125,000
Roads and parking	\$ 863,000
Picnic and site furnishings	\$ 145,000
Visitor Centre / infrastructure	\$ 1,365,000
Trails	\$ 823,000
Restoration of natural features	\$ 1,097,300
Visitors Impact Management Plan	<u>\$ 150,000</u>
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$ 4,568,300</b>
<u>Soft costs, fees, contingency (30%)</u>	<u>\$ 1,370,490</u>
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 5,938,790</b>

### **Overview of Financial Parameters**

The key financial and related parameters of the development plan for Hilton Falls Conservation Area are as follows:

- The cost of the development plan for Hilton Falls Conservation Area over the 10-year development timeframe is just under \$5.94 million (measured in terms of 2010 dollars); a stable capital-funding source must be established to facilitate plan implementation.
- Attendance at the conservation area is expected to grow significantly to just over 95,000 by the year 2020.
- While more visitors will generate increased revenues, the financial analysis in this report demonstrates that this by itself will not be sufficient to offset the higher costs of operation; however, despite increased operating costs, Hilton Falls Conservation Area can operate on a break even basis or even generate a small surplus, through a variety of strategies.
- To provide the enhanced level of customer services and environmental protection called for in this master plan and not incur an operating deficit, a pricing study must be undertaken to determine how to increase net revenues or identify means to subsidize operating costs.

### ***Putting it in Context – Conservation Halton’s Contributions to Society and the Environment***

Conservation Halton creates significant direct economic benefit in the community. The operations of Conservation Halton, plus the expenditures of visitors who come to the region to utilize the programs and services offered, create nearly \$12 million of additional gross domestic product (GDP) in Halton Region alone. This is associated with 274 jobs in the Region, \$8.4 million in wages and salaries and \$5.7 million in additional taxes paid. If this were a single business or industry, it would be recognized as a significant component of the economic base of the Region. Beyond Halton Region itself, there are further economic benefits accruing across the Province of Ontario.

In addition to the economic impacts, Conservation Halton provides a valuable service to the community in terms of ‘ecosystem services’ – the impact of the forest and wetlands maintained by Conservation Halton in terms of filtering and cleaning water and air. Ecosystem valuation quantifies the cost of providing these services commercially as opposed to having conservation authority lands provide these benefits ‘for free’. The estimated savings to society from these services provided by Conservation Halton’s holdings are nearly \$16 million annually.

Conservation Halton conservation areas provide a growing population with access to abundant, natural green space for leisure and recreation. More specifically, these spaces offer opportunities for recreation that promotes healthy living through physical activity and exercise. By keeping costs low, Conservation Halton conservation areas strive to offer accessibility to all residents while supporting communities that are culturally and socioeconomically diverse. In addition to serving local residents, as significant regional destinations, the conservation areas also serve to attract tourists to Halton Region.

The availability of Conservation Halton spaces, programs and services adds considerably to the perceived quality of life in Halton Region. This in turn can be extremely valuable in attracting the highly mobile ‘creative class,’ those individuals most likely to create businesses, invest in the community and bring new ideas and energies into the region. Thus, indirectly, Conservation Halton operations add to the attractiveness of the region overall as a place to live and work.

### ***Financial Sustainability Strategy***

The master planning process has made it abundantly clear that:

- While the prime focus of Conservation Halton's conservation areas has been and will continue to be protection and enhancement of the natural heritage resources, it is also imperative that there be consideration of the social and economic components of the sustainability model;
- As growth in visitation inevitably increases, so too must the investment in infrastructure, amenities, related facilities and the visitor impact management that is required to protect and enhance the natural heritage features, and thereby achieve and maintain the necessary balance between protection and usage;
- Protection of natural heritage resources requires key investments in:

Enhancements to existing facilities, infrastructure and amenities;

New facilities: educational, recreational and interpretive;

Protection and enhancement initiatives: visitor impact management, restoration, etc.

Annual base level of financial support should be sourced through Halton Region (the Province of Ontario and / or Municipalities, etc.) as the main recipient(s) of the benefits provided by this conservation area. This should result from (and possibly be correlated with) the significant population growth occurring in the Region, which will by itself place a heavier demand on Conservation Halton's areas and facilities. A new and different business model needs to be developed for Conservation Halton, one that acknowledges the significant economic benefits conferred upon Halton Region by Conservation Halton, and recognizes the pressures placed upon Conservation Halton by population growth.

Consequences of not providing adequate on-going capital funding may include the need to implement one or more of the following actions:

- Raise admission fees at specific conservation areas;
- Raise membership fees;
- Charge differentially at peak times;
- Limit visitation;
- Limit access to certain conservation areas;
- Cut back on some of the programs and services currently offered;
- Cut back the proposed capital development program or extend it beyond the projected 10-year timeframe with subsequent increases in cost.

Conservation Halton creates valuable environmental, social and economic benefits, and provides significant value-added services to Halton Region. In order to enable Conservation Halton to continue to provide these benefits, ongoing investment in Conservation Halton's conservation area facilities and programs is required.