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Halifax, Nova Scotia
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Item No. 10
Halifax Regional Council
July 21, 2020

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

SUBMITTED BY:

Original Signed by 

Jacques Dubé, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: May 28, 2020

SUBJECT: **Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Park Update**

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

September 6, 2016 Halifax Regional Council Motions:

MOVED by Councillor Rankin, seconded by Councillor Mosher that Halifax Regional Council receive the Facilitator's Report Regarding Negotiation of the Proposed Boundaries for the Blue Mountain/Birch Cove Lakes Regional Park in relation to the Highway 102 West Corridor and take no further action concerning the facilitation process or the report's recommendations. **MOTION PUT AND PASSED.**

MOVED by Councillor Rankin, seconded by Councillor Mosher that Halifax Regional Council refuse the request to initiate secondary planning for all Hwy 102 West Corridor lands at this time. **MOTION PUT AND PASSED.**

MOVED by Councillor Rankin, seconded by Councillor Mosher that Halifax Regional Council direct staff to explore opportunities and develop a program to acquire land to establish the proposed Blue Mountain – Birch Cove regional park, with a priority of providing public access to the provincially protected wilderness area, that includes, but is not limited to:

- a) Discussions with the Federal and Provincial governments;
- b) Discussions with all private land owners that own property located within the conceptual park boundary in Map 11 of the Regional Plan;
- c) Discussions with land conservation and community groups; and
- d) Reviewing the potential use of land use planning tools and conservation easements.

Staff is further directed to report back to Regional Council within six (6) months and then on an annual basis, staff report to Council on progress achieved in implementing the established Blue Mountain/Birch Cove Regional Park. **MOTION PUT AND PASSED**

April 25, 2017 Halifax Regional Council Motion:

MOVED by Councillor Zurawski, seconded by Councillor Mason that Halifax Regional Council direct staff to undertake additional analysis and advance discussions regarding the acquisition of lands or the rights to

lands for public access as identified within the staff report dated April 5, 2017 and the Private and Confidential Information Report dated April 5, 2017, and report back to Regional Council with any prospective terms, conditions, and costs. **MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipal Charter:

- 7A The purposes of the Municipality are to
- (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
 - (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities.

BACKGROUND

The 2014 Regional Plan identifies the Municipality's interest in establishing the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes (BMBCL) Regional Park. The proposed Park will abut and provide access to approximately 930 hectares of Crown Land designated by the Province as a protected Wilderness Area. The Regional Plan provides a conceptual park boundary for the park, identified on Map 11 as approximately 1600 hectares in size, which is an area that is over twenty times the size of Point Pleasant Park. The Plan indicates that the Map demonstrates a vision to be implemented over the life of the Regional Plan, through various tools, subject to financial ability and community interest. As such, the actual and eventual boundaries of the proposed park will depend on the Municipality's ability to acquire land from various private land owners within the conceptual park boundary. Development of the proposed park will also require coordination between the Municipality and Nova Scotia Environment, which manages the protected Wilderness Area that are located largely within the conceptual park boundary (Attachment A).

Following Regional Council's September 2016 motion, the Municipality has regularly communicated with private property owners concerning acquisition of land and has acquired lands in 2018 and 2019 along the north, south, and west of the conceptual park boundary line, abutting provincial protected wilderness area lands. In addition, with the additional business park development in Bayers Lake that is currently underway, ownership of a parkland parcel is to be transferred to the Municipality as subdivision proceeds. (Attachment B).

Pursuant to Regional Council's September 2016 direction, this report provides an annual update on the Municipality's acquisitions since 2017 and then outlines current information and initiatives concerning the establishment of the proposed park. This report was written prior to Regional Council's recent request for a report on a number of aspects related to BMBCL, which will be addressed separately in a future report.

Acquisitions since 2017

West Bedford Lands (North)

In January 2018, the Municipality acquired approximately 80 hectares in the vicinity of Hobson Lake. The acquisition abuts designated provincial wilderness area lands. Lands located immediately north of the acquired parcel, presently owned by West Bedford Holdings Limited, are being developed as a mixed-use subdivision that is enabled by a development agreement. Through the development agreement, the Municipality will be acquiring dedicated parkland, including lands that are planned as a regional trailhead entrance into the West Bedford Lands.

Currently, some users enter from the north into the protected wilderness area from on-street parking at the end of Colins Road or from a parking lot at the Maskwa Aquatic Club, located at the end of Saskatoon Drive. Neither of these locations were planned as primary park entrances. The planned new trailhead, will

be built on new municipal parkland in the rapidly developing residential lands of West Bedford, and can serve to ease the potential volume of users looking to access the wilderness area at the two existing points.

Shortly following the acquisition of the West Bedford Lands, the Municipality held a public consultation session to both provide and collect preliminary information about the lands in a workshop format. One of the matters discussed was the need to establish new accesses.

Nine Mile River Lands (South)

In April 2019, the Municipality acquired approximately 54 hectares along Nine Mile River, in Timberlea. The parcel abuts designated provincial wilderness area lands, which are located to the north. The northeast portion of the acquired property falls within the conceptual park boundary. Where there is no existing road frontage to access this property, the parcel's long-term development is dependent on, and subsequent to, the potential development of abutting private lands located to the east. In the short-term, this acquisition is expected to remain in its current undeveloped state and there are no immediate considerations associated with advancing public use of the property.

Blue Mountain Lands (West)

In 2019, the Municipality also acquired approximately 75 hectares, comprised of four separate parcels, in the vicinity of Blue Mountain, southeast of the Kingswood subdivision. Two properties are separated from the proposed park by the #113 highway corridor, which is owned by Nova Scotia Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal. The concurrent acquisition of the other two properties, southeast of the proposed highway corridor, secured public ownership of the remaining private lands located near to Blue Mountain, which presently serves as a recognized destination point for wilderness hiking. The properties abut the designated provincial wilderness area lands to the south, east and west, and the Municipality's acquisition removed an identified gap.

Given their remote location, the Blue Mountain lands are expected to remain in their undeveloped state. Any immediate considerations of public use are limited. At present, it is expected there would be continued informal use of these acquired parcels by hikers seeking a demanding wilderness experience and who have ventured onto them over provincial lands to access Blue Mountain. It is also expected that the potential development of the proposed highway corridor will have a determinant role in any future planning involving the public's recreational use and enjoyment of the properties.

Federal Funding

In early 2019, the Municipality was successful in obtaining over \$860,000 from the federal government's *Pathway to Canada - Quick Start* program to contribute to the Nine Mile River and Blue Mountain lands. However, a subsequent application later in 2019 for a more substantial funding program, the *Pathway to Canada - Challenge Fund* was unsuccessful.

DISCUSSION

The Municipality has experienced success in advancing the future park through the land acquisitions outlined above. As subdivision development is occurring, planning is needing to further contemplate the park and its accesses while the Municipality continues with its acquisition program. The remainder of this report reviews:

- the current municipal acquisition program;
- communications between the Municipality and the province;
- park planning activities;
- public engagement; and
- the potential incorporation of park infrastructure costs in future capital budgets.

Current Acquisition Program

Communications with the remaining private landowners identified within or along the conceptual park boundary will continue in 2020-21. Staff will provide specific reports to Regional Council as new opportunities arise.

The capital funds identified with parkland acquisition are balanced to meet various priorities identified by Regional Council, for not only the development of the future BMBCL Regional Park, but also other potential parkland-related acquisitions throughout the entire Municipality. It is not anticipated that the Municipality will want to re-assess its current approach to acquisitions involving BMBCL for some time. The expectation is that a steady, continued progress in securing the public's interest in lands within the conceptual park boundary could take several years to realize, although much progress has been made in the last three years.

In addition to municipal acquisitions, the Nova Scotia Nature Trust has submitted a funding request to the Municipality for an acquisition of lands that are outside of the conceptual park boundary but between provincially designated wilderness area lands. As a result, the lands could potentially serve to meet broader ecological objectives associated with natural landscape connectivity. The funding request is the subject of a separate report.

Communications with NS Environment

With public acquisitions such as West Bedford in 2018, it is recognized that there is an increased need to formalize the proposed park and opportunities to access the wilderness lands. For West Bedford as an example, it is now possible to hike directly over public lands to a series of trails identified within the "core" wilderness areas near to Ash Lake. Previously, the pattern of private land ownership would have served as a possible impediment in restricting users entering this space.

Nova Scotia Environment is responsible for management of all provincially-designated Wilderness Area lands. While municipal and provincial staff have met on an on-going basis to discuss BMBCL related matters since 2016, a formal framework will need to be established to outline possible shared management objectives and plans. The future regional park, with 900 hectares of legislated protected area, will ultimately require a cooperative framework to address park management challenges identified with existing environmental conditions, access, and future public use.

In 2020-21, staff will continue discussions with Nova Scotia Environment on the potential framework for our ongoing cooperation. This will help identify shared interests regarding a variety of park planning subjects including: the ongoing assessment of environmental conditions, access and trail infrastructure, and opportunities for public stewardship. It is expected that the Municipality's relationship with NS Environment will continue to evolve as the Municipality proceeds from an initial acquisition phase, to park planning efforts, and ultimately into an ongoing management phase.

Park Planning - Public Access

The Regional Plan's identification of BMBCL Regional Park is supported by a consultant's study ("EDM Plan") that was produced in 2006 following significant public engagement. The EDM Plan identified where the proposed Park would consist of a "core" and surrounding "edge" wilderness areas. The identification of these two broad landscape categories helps to shape the expected extent of future park plans. The EDM Plan also identifies where the future regional park would help to meet "human use" objectives, as much as meeting identified ecological objectives, given the immediate proximity of the lands to a large urban population.

Identification of the park's "edge" wilderness also allows for space and opportunity to integrate recreational uses and interests, in a manner where the protected wilderness area can still be made accessible for other potential users. Proposed trailheads at various points along the park boundary can subsequently be

planned to provide access to a varying degree of natural landscapes, moving in towards the more remote and undeveloped interior.

The future park will require several entrances; in two of these areas, subdivision development is occurring that will eventually lead to the realization of two such points (Attachment C). Since these locations are linked with development activity occurring in the surrounding area, at this time, these accesses are being planned but will not be completely realized until the surrounding development is completed and consideration is given to other matters such as possible linkages to formalized system of trails.

Bayers Lake Trailhead Development (South)

Property originally sold by the Municipality in 2013 included an identified area of lands that will be conveyed back to the Municipality, as a parkland dedication, as the lands are subdivided. This parkland parcel has been identified as a trailhead for the future park. It leads immediately into the southeast section of protected wilderness area and is in the vicinity of Susies Lake. By securing this location, the Municipality also anticipated it would be near existing transit routes, an aspect that may be potentially difficult to replicate in other locations.

The anticipated timeline for the conveyance of this parkland is tied to the subdivision activity and development schedule of the private landowner.

Work will continue on the future park property including the grading of lands for the proposed parking lot at the trailhead by the developer. However, while a trailhead is being planned, the development of a parking lot and other amenities, which would be the responsibility of the Municipality, is not expected to be until park planning occurs, to ensure that the limited area of provincial wilderness area lands are not overburdened.

West Bedford Trailhead Development (North)

A 2016 development agreement between the Municipality and West Bedford Holdings Limited (WBHL) identified where, through future parkland dedication, the Municipality would acquire lands in the vicinity of Black Duck Brook. These dedicated lands would accommodate a parking lot development off Brookline Drive, in the planned community of West Bedford, to serve as a formal trailhead into the proposed park. The 2018 acquisition anticipated this future trailhead's location and provides for additional transitional space between the trailhead site and the park's core wilderness area. The development of a West Bedford trailhead would also reduce the challenges associated with current access points.

Trail developments near Black Duck Brook will be designed and built to serve local recreational use. Additionally, options to provide access to Hobsons Lake will be considered. Hobsons Lake is identified as a key destination point in the proposed park, given the attractive elements found in the immediate natural environment, such as Hobson Lake falls, and where the location of the Lake is near to a series of existing trails found on the abutting provincial lands.

The anticipated timeline for the prospective residential development in the surrounding West Bedford area is currently ahead of initial assessments. In 2020-2021, staff will review design considerations with WBHL for the trailhead and assess the suitability of potential trail alternatives leading to Hobson Lake.

Public Engagement

As noted in the Background Section, in June 2018, municipal staff held a public engagement session that was focused on the acquisition near Hobson Lake. One point that was repeated in the various feedback notes was the potential issues that might occur with higher volumes of park users at existing points of access, including additional possible conflicts with adjacent residential uses. The Municipality is moving to address this concern by planning and establishing new trailheads as subdivision development occurs.

While the development of a trailhead associated with the West Bedford subdivision has been well established, the Municipality wants to engage with the public to discuss the planning of amenities and trail development in the area. Due to COVID-19, a public engagement session was not possible. While the Municipality determines options for future public engagement, the BMBCL website continues to be updated to highlight current activities and plans for the future park.

Implementation and Future Budgeting

Pursuant to Regional Council's direction, the Municipality has been focused on in the last three years on land acquisition. As additional planning efforts are undertaken, it is expected that future updates to Regional Council will identify anticipated capital and operational expenditures for the development of the future park. The establishment of the BMBCL park is a significant undertaking. Therefore, although there are many successes that are being built upon, Regional Council and the public should expect a moderate but ongoing rollout of BMBCL initiatives.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications that are associated with this report. Any discussion involved with a prospective land acquisition will be fully outlined in a specific future report to Regional Council. Any allocations identified with proposed park infrastructure will be identified in future capital budgets.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

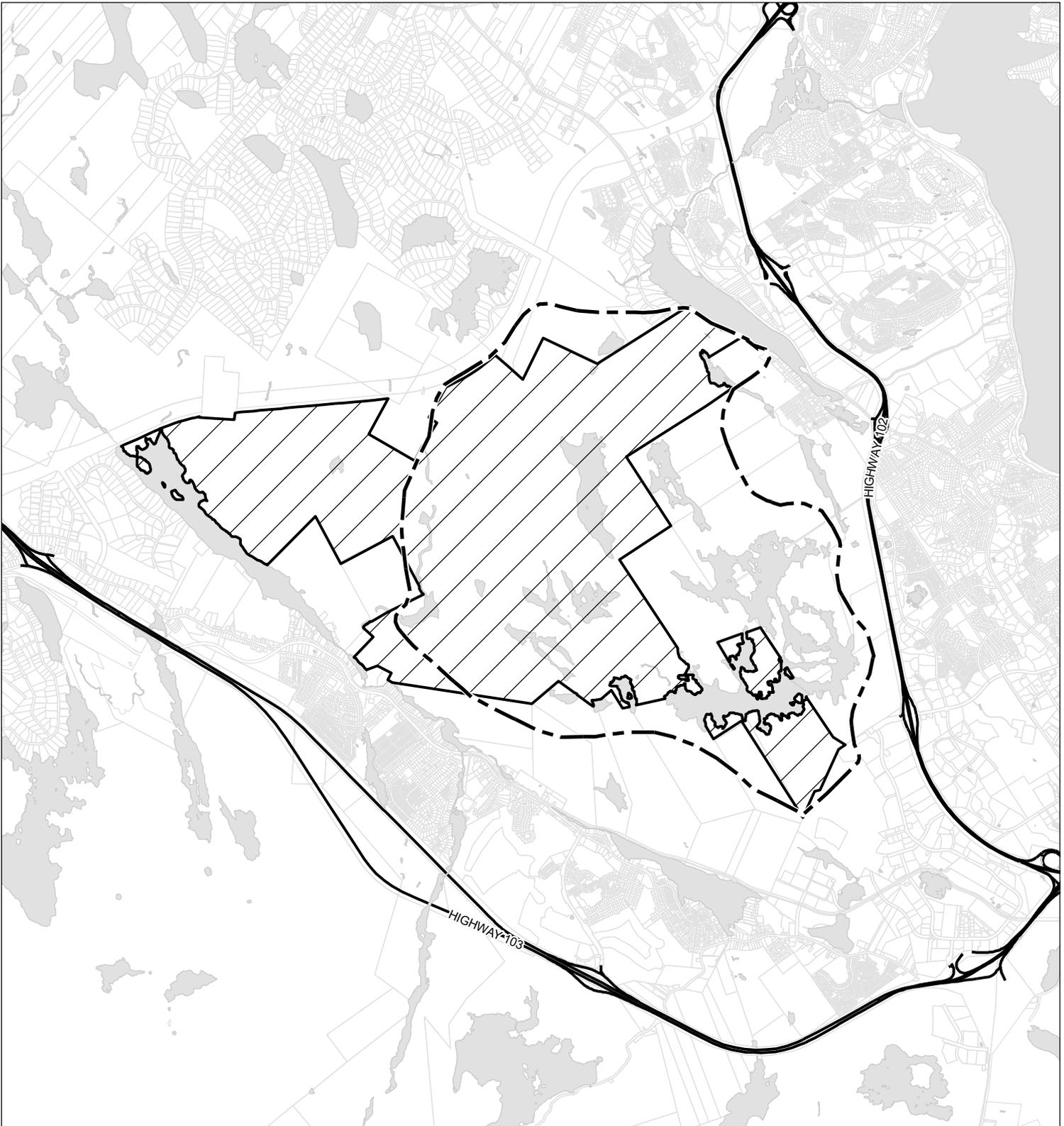
There was no community engagement undertaken in the preparation of this staff report.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment A Reference Map
- Attachment B Acquisitions
- Attachment C Proposed West Bedford / Bayers Lake Entrances

A copy of this report can be obtained online at halifax.ca or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

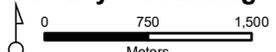
Report Prepared by: Douglas Reid, Real Property Planning Coordinator,
Policy & Planning, Parks and Recreation, 902.237.7856



REFERENCE MAP BLUE MOUNTAIN- BIRCH COVE LAKES REGIONAL PARK

-  Conceptual Wilderness Park Boundary
-  Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area

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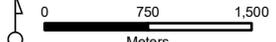


ACQUISITIONS

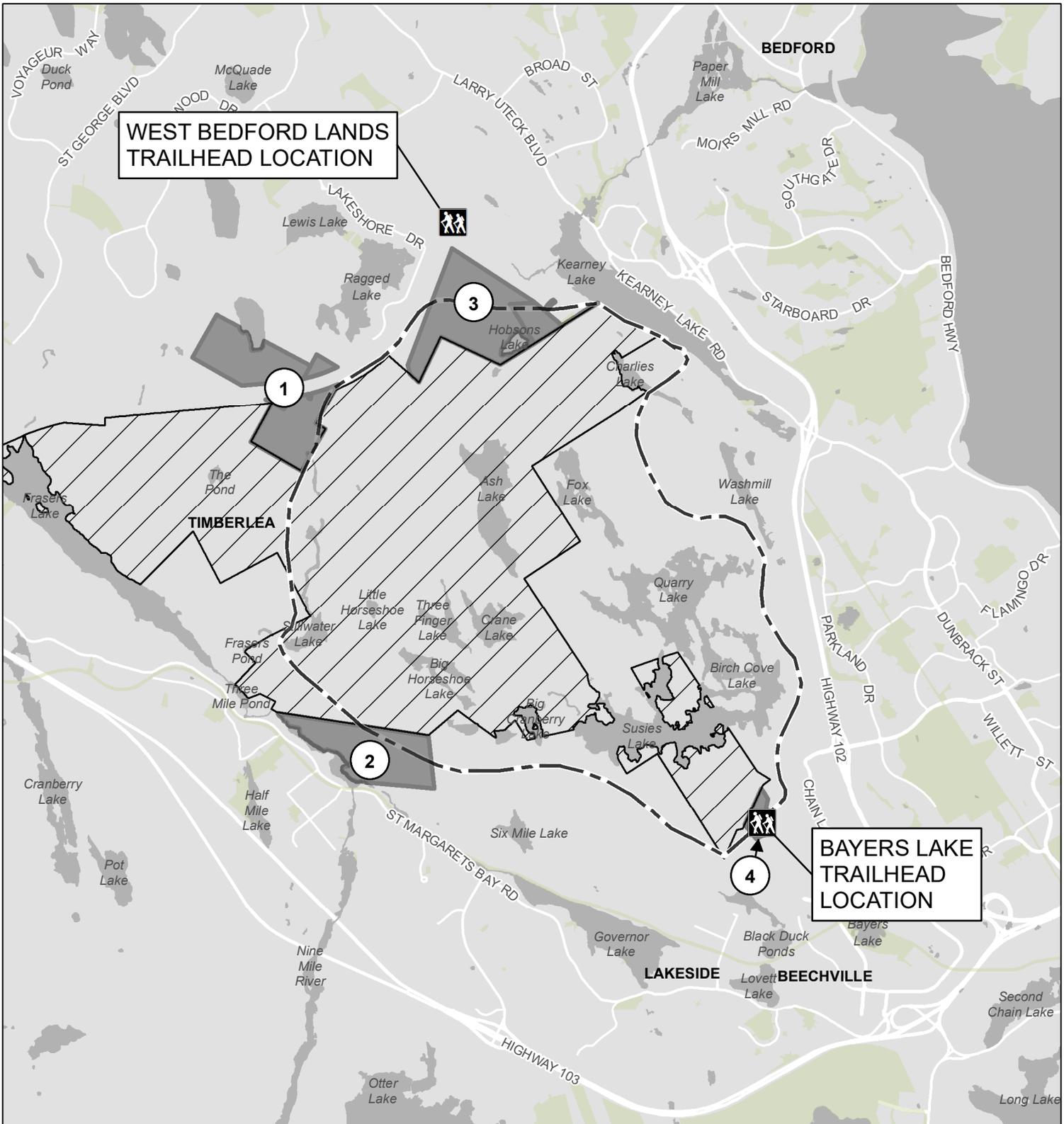
BLUE MOUNTAIN- BIRCH COVE LAKES REGIONAL PARK

- | | | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|--|
|  Conceptual Wilderness Park Boundary |  Blue Mountain Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area |  Blue Mountain |  Nine Mile River |  Blue Mountain |  Hobson Lake |
| | | | |  Bayers Lands (to be acquired with subdivision) | |

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**PROPOSED WEST BEDFORD/BAYERS LAKE ENTRANCES
BLUE MOUNTAIN- BIRCH COVE LAKES REGIONAL PARK**

- Conceptual Wilderness Park Boundary
- Lakes Wilderness Area
- 1 Blue Mountain
- 2 Nine Mile River
- 3 Hobson Lake
- 4 Bayers Lands (to be acquired with subdivision)

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