

Community-Based Wilderness Stewardship in HRM

HRM possesses a major asset to fight climate change and to enhance its natural environment. This asset is its green space that covers more than 80% of HRM with almost 20% of it provincially protected wilderness. Green space and particularly wilderness constitute an invaluable asset in reducing climate warming through carbon sequestration and in improving biodiversity and the general health of our ecosystems. They are invaluable also to the physical and mental health of HRM citizens who use the green space and the wilderness within it for recreation.

This major asset of HRM, however, is beset with a serious problem. The green space and the wilderness within HRM are deteriorating through public use, undermining their value for climate action and for the health and enjoyment of HRM citizens. The reason for the deterioration is that HRM citizens lack training in how to steward their wilderness and green space. This problem can be corrected at low cost, as demonstrated in the four-year steward-training program developed in 2017 on The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail with ongoing collaboration between the Woodens River Watershed Environmental Organization (WRWEO) and the St. Margaret's Bay Stewardship Association (SMBSA). See the following link for details.

<https://wrweo.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2020-BTSP-Year-In-Review-Report-Final-1.pdf>

The Regional Plan names five Municipal Wilderness Parks: Sandy Lake Regional Park, Blue Mountain – Birch Cove Lakes, Western Common Wilderness Common, Shaw Wilderness Park, and McIntosh Run Regional Park. These wilderness parks include both municipal and provincial land or are adjacent to provincial land. These lands can be stewarded in the same way as The Bluff Wilderness Hiking Trail, but now it would be through the direction of an HRM staff person who coordinates the steward training of volunteers recruited from the various volunteer organizations associated with these municipal parks. In this way HRM could play a leadership role in wilderness protection and stewardship within the municipality.

It may be objected that the municipality has no legal jurisdiction over the lands that are provincially owned within the municipal parks. To address this issue, we need to think outside the boxes of who has legal jurisdiction. That is not difficult, however, since from the 1990s to the present HRM and the Province have coordinated in the development of trail systems through the Halifax Regional Trails Association. Many public trails have been built on provincial land through this municipal organization with provincial “letters of authority” permitting trail construction with funding and environmental assessments from all three levels of government. Moreover, all this coordination has been done at comparatively low cost. The precedent is clear.

What is being proposed now is no different in principle. The proposal is to create a pilot program to train citizen volunteers to be stewards of the land within one of the above municipal wilderness parks. This Community-Based Wilderness Stewardship program would be similar to The Bluff Trail steward training program detailed in the link above. In January sixty-two community groups within Our HRM Alliance endorsed the proposed program (see Alliance membership list in the link).

<https://wrweo.ca/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CBWS-2021-04-29.pdf>

On this proposal some steward training will take place on municipal land and some on provincial land. All training would be within HRM and all to the ultimate benefit of HRM citizens. These citizens have a vital interest in preserving the health of their HRM environment, in helping to fight climate change, and in preserving the parks that enrich their lives.

Citizens who live in HRM are, after all, not divided into two categories: municipal and provincial. Levels of government are so divided, not citizens. The citizens who are relevant are simply the ones who live in HRM. For the sake of those citizens, HRM needs to address Themes 8 and 9 in the Regional Plan Review by coordinating with the Province in preserving the vital asset of HRM green space and wilderness that is currently under threat. A low-cost solution is to develop a coordinated, HRM-wide, community-based wilderness stewardship program.

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In addition to the sixty-two community groups listed in the last link, this steward program is endorsed by the WRWEO Board and Paul Berry, WRWEO Board chair and treasurer, David Patriquin, ecologist and member of WRWEO. See the last link.