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Item No. 15.1.6
Halifax Regional Council
May 23, 2023

TO: Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

Original Signed

SUBMITTED BY: _____
Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: May 15, 2023

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

ORIGIN

December 7, 2021 Regional Council Meeting (Item 15.1.6)

MOVED by Deputy Mayor Lovelace, seconded by Councillor Blackburn

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to:

1. Initiate a park planning project for Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes as outlined in this report, based on the consideration of:
 - (a) the existing conceptual park boundary to reflect new circumstances, such as the municipality's Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes land acquisitions; and
 - (b) an enlarged conceptual park boundary to the north of the Highway 113 Corridor, as represented on Map 11 of the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy;
2. Undertake initial work on the park planning project to include:
 - (a) formalizing the roles of the Province, Nova Scotia Nature Trust, and Parks Canada;
 - (b) determining Mi'kmaq perspectives and interests in the project;
 - (c) consulting and receiving feedback on the project with community stakeholder groups and the public;
 - (d) determining the role of a possible committee or group to support and contribute to the project, and forms of public consultation;
 - (e) undertaking background studies and reviews; and
3. Negotiate and execute contribution agreements or other agreements, including those with Parks Canada for work related to the initiation of the park planning project such as background studies, subject to the availability of municipal funds that may be required, within approved capital and operating budgets or as otherwise approved by Regional Council.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipal Charter, Section 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON PAGE 2

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to advance the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes (BMBCL) conceptual park planning project and Parks Canada National Urban Park program as outlined within this staff report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, the Municipality signed a statement of collaboration with Parks Canada to consider the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes (BMBCL) area as a candidate National Urban Park, under a new federal program. Since then, background work and studies have been developed with stakeholder and public input. In addition, a “Partnership Group” has been formed to collaborate on the project. It is comprised of staff representatives from HRM; the Province; Nova Scotia Nature Trust; Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, as represented by Kwilmu'kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK); Sipekne'katik First Nation; and Parks Canada.

With additional Parks Canada funding, park planning is recommended as one of the next steps of the project. It will be focused on public and nature trust lands and reported on through subsequent staff reports.

BACKGROUND

On December 7, 2021, Regional Council initiated a project for the development of a prospective BMBCL conceptual park plan that included an expansion of a potential park boundary to include lands to the north of the prospective Highway 113 (Attachment A). This was outlined within an October 29, 2021 staff report.

The October 29, 2021 staff report identified a scoping for the project that included:

- a desire to collaborate with other public land partners and incorporate Mi'kmaw participation in the park planning project;
- initial steps that would be taken to advance the background analysis about the lands that would be undertaken as part of an overall park planning project; and
- measures for stakeholder and general public engagement.

As part of the project, a collaboration between HRM and Parks Canada to consider a possible National Urban Park designation within the BMBCL Area under a new federal program was outlined. It was identified that the steps involved with the National Urban Park process align with the conceptual park planning process that was being contemplated by HRM.

This staff report provides an update and identifies the next steps that are envisioned for the BMBCL conceptual park planning and National Urban Park project. Information about infrastructure development and funding is also outlined.

DISCUSSION

Parks Canada National Urban Park Program

Parks Canada's National Urban Park program was launched in 2021 to support the creation of a network of nationally recognized parks in urban settings. This is to be achieved through collaborations with municipalities, provinces, indigenous organizations, conservation groups, and others across Canada. In August 2021, HRM signed a Statement of Collaboration with Parks Canada to consider parts of the BMBCL Area as a candidate National Urban Park. Such a recognition is different than other National Parks that are managed by Parks Canada. A National Urban Park designation could take different forms and include varied models of governance and park management structures.

The National Urban Park program is being developed at the same time as sites across the country are

being considered for designation. A policy framework is being created by Parks Canada that is based on: conserving nature; connecting people with nature; and advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

The process for National Urban Park Designation is comprised of four steps:

- *Pre-feasibility*, which includes confirming local interest and undertaking preliminary assessments;
- *Planning*, which includes initial study, identification of a park boundary and vision;
- *Designation*, which is comprised of finalizing a proposal as a national urban park, confirming roles of partners in park governance, and subsequent designation; and
- *Implementation*, which involves implementing governance structures, designing facilities and infrastructure, and opening the park to the public (Attachment B).

As this is a Parks Canada-led initiative and part of a broader national urban park initiative, these processes and associated timings are taken in step with Parks Canada to achieve the desired outcomes.

After the Pre-feasibility phase, Parks Canada may make foundational investments that could include funding for land acquisitions and infrastructure.

The consideration of part of the BMBCL Area as a National Urban Park is largely in the *Planning* phase, with some initial work that might be considered as within the *Designation* phase, such as confirming the roles of partners in the project.

Partnership Group

In conjunction with the Parks Canada National Urban Park program, oversight of the conceptual park planning project and related initiatives is being undertaken by a “Partnership Group” that has been formed, which includes representatives of land holders and Mi’kmaq organizations:

- Parks Canada;
- The Province of Nova Scotia, represented by Environment and Climate Change;
- HRM;
- Nova Scotia Nature Trust;
- Mi’kmaq of Nova Scotia as represented by Kwilmu’kw Maw-klusuaqn (KMK); and
- Sipekne’katik First Nation.

The Partnership Group meets on a regular basis on the BMBCL National Urban Park program, the BMBCL background research, park planning, and other related initiatives. This is expected to continue as the project advances.

Background Research and Park Planning

Background Research

With funding support from Parks Canada, HRM commissioned a background study of the BMBCL Area and surrounding land area. This study was undertaken by Stantec Consulting and resulted in the draft Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes Comprehensive Study (Comprehensive Study)^[1].

For the purpose of the Comprehensive Study, the geographic area shown on Map 11 of the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy (RMPS) was used as a study boundary. This is a study area boundary only, that encompasses both public and private landholdings, and does not reflect land use designations or zones. Private landholdings are designated in the Regional Plan and Municipal Planning Strategy for a wide range of future land uses.

The park planning process as outlined in this report applies only to lands owned or under the control of the Partnership Group (Attachment C) and any additional private lands that might be acquired for the purpose

[1] Edits to the Comprehensive Study are being completed and once complete will be posted on HRM’s website.

of connection or park integration, as described in the Park Boundary Section of this staff report. Other private lands within the conceptual boundary as shown on Map 11 may be subject to other future land uses, including development. Those areas were included in the study area because of the relationships of adjacent lands with the proposed park.

The work in the Comprehensive Study identifies important characteristics of these lands (Map 11), organized into document sections with finding highlights as follows:

Ecological and Recreational Current Conditions

The study on ecological and recreational conditions highlights the presence and importance of rare ecosystems, freshwater ecosystems, aquatic connectivity, wildlife habitat connectivity, ecological connectivity, water quality, and habitat for species of concern/at risk in the BMBCL Study Area. The study identifies 23 Species at Risk (SAR) and 61 Species of Conservation Concern (SOCC) in the area, including lichens, vascular plants, invertebrates, birds, fish, mammals, and reptiles. The dominant vegetation in the area includes softwood, and mixed wood, with some ecological values having an elevated potential to support SAR and SOCC. The study also assessed the functions of wetlands in the area and notes the importance of promoting connectivity between the BMBCL Study Area and other nearby wilderness areas to support ecological connectivity for wildlife. Finally, the study notes the importance of wildlife crossings and other measures to support ecological connectivity in the face of constraints posed by residential areas and roadways.

Archaeological and Cultural Study

The study on archaeological and cultural conditions identified several locations within the study area with high potential for Pre-contact and/or Historic Period archaeological resources. These locations include the head of Frasers Lake and Mouth of Maple Lake, the watercourse between Maple Lake and Upper Sheldrake Lake, the Fraser Sawmill Site, the Coxs Lake Potential Sawmill Site, Blue Mountain, Hobsons Lake, and the Granite Quarry and Dam Site. The study notes that these areas have dry level terrain suitable for past human habitation, were strategic locations for harvesting resources, or have characteristics that elevate their potential for past human occupation and use. Evidence of past human activity, such as quarrying activity, buildings, and dams, were also identified at some of these locations.

Land Use and Settlement Analysis

The review of land use and settlement found that the study area is characterized by a mix of economic and cultural activities, with residential urban settlement features dominating interfaces between public and private lands. There is informal public access for recreational activities. Land ownership concerns were identified as a land use constraint, with the need for long-term transition or acquisition of key private properties to public ownership. The study area falls within the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy, which outlines future growth and development between 2014 and 2031. Lands associated with the proposed BMBCL Regional Park are currently both privately and publicly owned, and attention should be placed on ensuring that proposed development near or adjoining existing public lands is of a suitable use and scale. Three site-specific development requests that being considered by HRM, and there are also three "legacy subdivisions" within the study area are noted.

Governance

The Comprehensive Study also contains preliminary information about governance models that apply to parks that have may have relevance to the BMBCL circumstance. No conclusions about a suitable model are derived for BMBCL and this will be a future consideration for the Partnership Group.

The Comprehensive Study was informed and enhanced by substantial public consultation that included:

- three key participant engagement sessions that was comprised of representatives from groups with longstanding interests in BMBCL and others with affiliations with more broad-based community interests;

- a general public engagement session; and
- targeted interview workshops with individuals with in-depth knowledge of the BMBCL Area.

Next Stages of Conceptual Park Planning

There are various anticipated components to the development of a BMBCL conceptual park plan, much of which were identified within the previous staff report and are aligned with the necessary work required for consideration of the National Urban Park and which are updated below.

Conceptual Plan Boundary

The boundary for the BMBCL conceptual park plan is to be comprised of lands that are under the ownership and control of the Partnership Group (BMBCL Partnership Lands) (Attachment C). In addition, it is envisioned that the following could be identified within the project:

- areas where a connection between any BMBCL partnership lands that are currently separated would be beneficial, should they be able to be obtained; and
- provincial crown lands which are not currently recognized as part of the BMBCL Wilderness Area, but that may be beneficial for inclusion.

During the development of the conceptual park plan, it is anticipated that Partnership Group participants may continue to explore the acquisition of private lands. Additional lands that may be acquired during the preparation of the park plan would be considered for integration with an amended boundary. The park plan may also recognize that additional private lands that are beneficial to the park, could be considered for acquisition.

Vision Statement

A collective vision statement is to be developed that outlines the long-term vision for the prospective park, along with high-level objectives and principles to guide park development and management. Some preliminary identification of a vision statement has been undertaken by the Partnership Group but will be the subject of additional attention.

Scope

To further consideration of the National Urban Park program, the conceptual park plan is anticipated to address matters such as:

- ecological and cultural resource protection and opportunities for nature-based recreation;
- management zones that support both front-country and back-country, including trail locations and types, and appropriate forms of recreation;
- guidance over the appropriate interface of the park and urban settlement features, including existing and future transportation routes and utilities;
- public access and infrastructure development needs and priorities;
- opportunities for Indigenous reconciliation;
- opportunities for delivery of co-benefits arising from the park such as climate change, mitigation/adaptation, and the delivery of natural benefits such as protection for wildlife corridor and water quality;
- potential opportunities for inclusive delivery of benefits especially for historically marginalized groups;
- key monitoring, research, mitigation, and management requirements to ensure public safety and the maintenance of ecological integrity including risks associated with forest fires and water quality degradation;
- options for long term governance of the park that provides for the ongoing collaboration of land owners/managers, integration of Indigenous values and leadership, and opportunities for public and stakeholder participation in park management and stewardship; and
- implementation plans, including expected development costs and phasing.

The conceptual park planning work will be undertaken by a consultant that will be commissioned by HRM, with oversight by the Partnership Group. It is expected that the consulting work will occur within Fiscal 2023/24.

Stakeholder and General Public Consultation

Public consultation has been a key component of the conceptual park planning work to date. Public consultation is an important part of developing the BMBCL conceptual park plan as it enables the gathering of valuable insights and feedback from stakeholders and the community. A variety of methods are envisioned to facilitate dialogue and participation, such as public meetings, surveys, online forums, and stakeholder/community workshops. These approaches are to ensure that the park plan reflects the needs, priorities, and concerns of the community, and ultimately results in a more successful and sustainable project.

Other Related Initiatives

While HRM will be responsible for commissioning the BMBCL conceptual park plan, there are separate but related initiatives that are being considered by other Partner Group participants and may provide information that could be helpful to the BMBCL conceptual park plan, including:

- a study of the ecological connectivity; and
- enhanced research and investigations for Mi'kmaw interests.

In addition, aside from work that is directly related to the conceptual park planning work, HRM is also commissioning separate studies to consider the suitability of some lands for possible future urban development that are adjacent to the Partnership Lands. These background studies are targeted for completion in spring 2024 and will be provided to Regional Council for their consideration in assessing the future organization of land use and management of land in this area.

Funding

HRM and Parks Canada entered into an initial contribution agreement in January 2022. It addressed HRM's project costs for matters such as the hiring of consulting services. A second contribution agreement was approved in March 2023 that provides further funding for:

- the completion of the initial stages of Hobson Lake/Black Duck Brook trailhead in 2022/23 (\$452K), which is now largely concluded;
- the next phase of HRM's conceptual park planning in 2023/24, that is to include further consulting work (\$530K); and
- further trailhead infrastructure planning and trail development at Hobson Lake/Black Duck Brook in 2023/24 (\$320K).

Additional information about the funding for infrastructure projects is described below in the Infrastructure Development section.

Governance

When the prospective conceptual park plan and related documents are completed, they will be considered for approval by each of the Partnership Groups. For HRM, this would involve consideration by the Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee and approval by Regional Council. The completion of the park plan and related documents will be used to inform opportunities associated with a Parks Canada National Urban Park designation and any related park development and management responsibilities.

Infrastructure Development

Although much of the emphasis of the BMBCL project is on the conceptual park plan, the quick rate of urbanization in HRM has meant park-related infrastructure has needed to be considered and, in some

cases, developed. Otherwise, new subdivision development may occur with unplanned accesses to the BMBCL Partnership Lands. There are two areas where infrastructure has been implemented or is being planned:

- Bayers Lake Business Park Extension: HRM has obtained a parkland dedication that is being planned as a trailhead with a parking area and other possible supporting infrastructure that would lead to provincial Wilderness Area lands, and ultimately to a broader BMBCL area that may be achieved with an acquisition of additional lands. A trailhead is not being established at this time, but grading is occurring and HRM has financially contributed to the installation of piped serviced laterals into the property to allow for the possibility of a future washroom and drinking fountain. This has been identified for trailhead design planning for 2023/24.
- Hobson Lake/Black Duck Brook: When HRM obtained the Hobson Lake lands, a trailhead was envisioned as subdivision development occurred. With the pace of urbanization in West Bedford, HRM has developed a trailhead comprised of a parking lot for approximately 55 vehicles, the capability for the future installation of a washroom/drinking fountain through the installation of laterals, and a trail connection to Black Duck Brook. This was previously identified as a planned trailhead, but has now been largely completed, with funding from Parks Canada as a foundational investment.

Other possible trailhead locations, particularly those that may already have an informal access to Partnership Lands are also the focus of review and the possible development of conceptual plans.

Next Steps

The next major milestones in the project involve the conceptual park planning that is to occur in fiscal 2023/24 which will include stakeholder and public consultation as noted above. This work will continue to inform and assist the ongoing discussions of the Partnership Group with Parks Canada on the National Urban Park Program. Upon completion, this work will be the subject of a staff report to the Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee and Regional Council that would also address the prospect of a National Urban Park designation under the Parks Canada program.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Funding for the capital components of the conceptual park planning and infrastructure projects is provided through Parks Canada and governed by a contribution agreement. Operating costs, including project management and capacity needs, can be accommodated within operating budgets and can be supplemented by Parks Canada funding. Future capital funding for implementation of infrastructure will be outlined in future reports and considered through HRM's capital budget process.

RISK CONSIDERATION

The risk of not proceeding with the activities identified in this staff report is that the benefits that could arise with the Parks Canada National Urban Park program and the overall BMBCL project may not be realized. Proceeding with the report recommendations will address these risks.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There was no formal community engagement undertaken in the preparation of this report. The recommendations within the report contain directions for extensive consultation with community stakeholder groups and the general public.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The recommendations in this report direct initiatives that support the retention of lands for ecological

conservation and nature-based recreation.

ALTERNATIVES

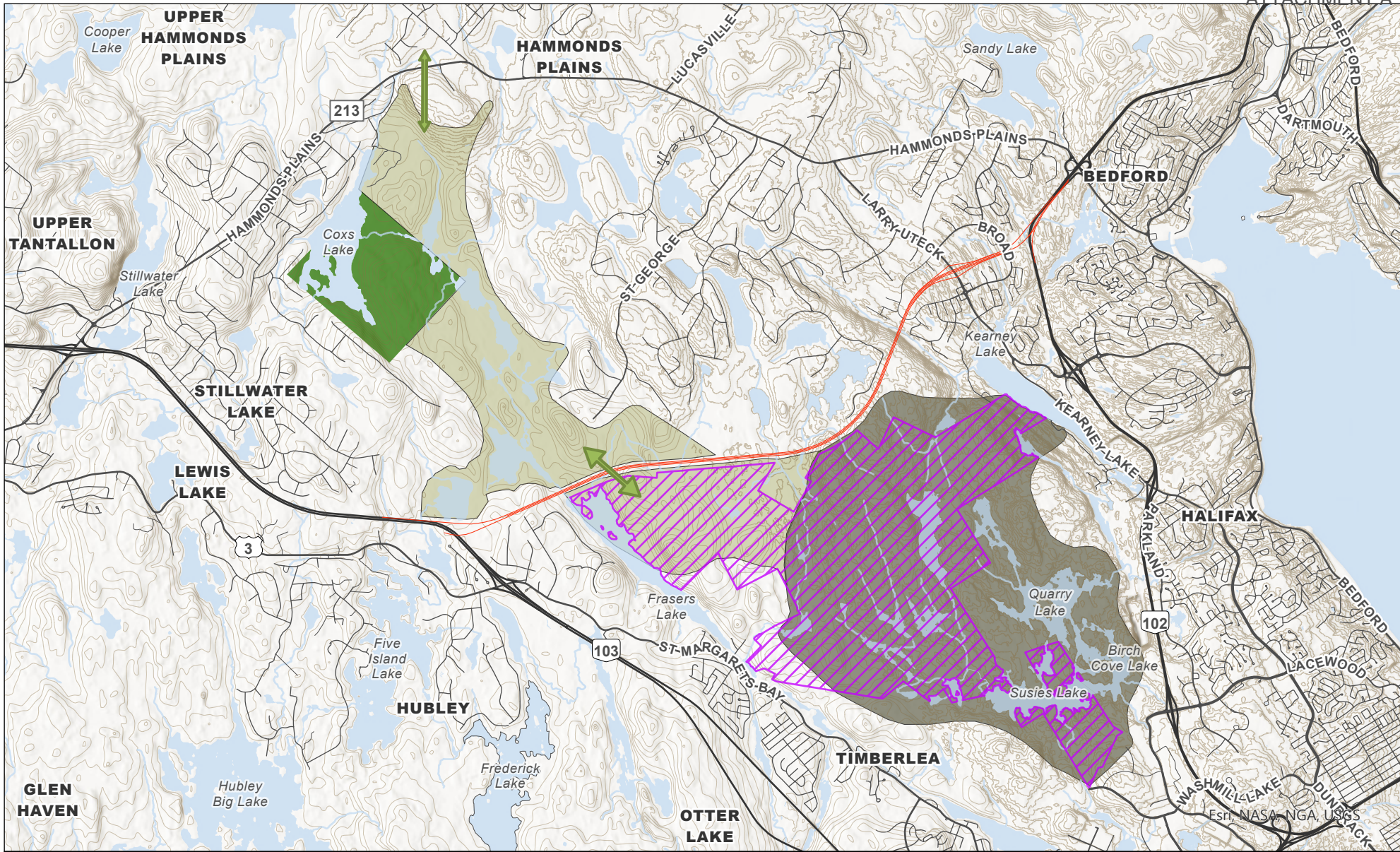
1. Regional Council could choose to direct changes to the conceptual park planning project that is outlined within this staff report. Substantial changes could involve discussion with other Partnership Group members and a possible new staff report.
2. Regional Council could choose to not proceed with the conceptual park planning project that is outlined within this staff report. This has implications that are likely to include ending the relationships with Parks Canada and the Partnership Group.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A	BMBCL Area Map
Attachment B	Parks Canada Process for National Urban Park Designation
Attachment C	BMBCL Partnership Lands Map

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: Richard Harvey, Manager, Policy and Planning, 902.476.5822



BMBCL Area Map (Representation of Map 11 of the Regional Municipal Planning Strategy)

- Park Boundary (Concept)
- Core Wilderness (Back Country)
- Cox's Lake Park Reserve
- Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area (designated 2009)
- Greenbelting corridor concept
- Proposed Route (HWY 113)
- 5m contour

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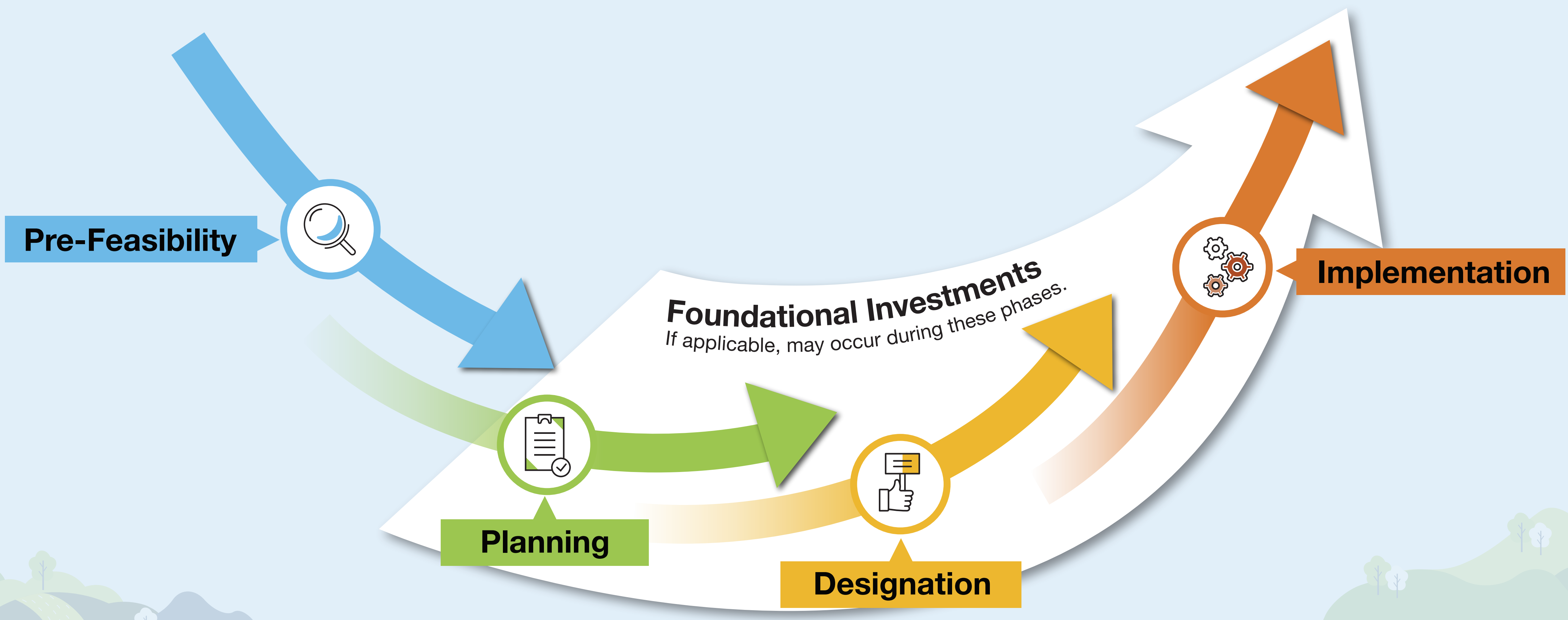


Meters

Date: 3/8/2023

Process for National Urban Park Designation: Activities, Outcomes and Deliverables

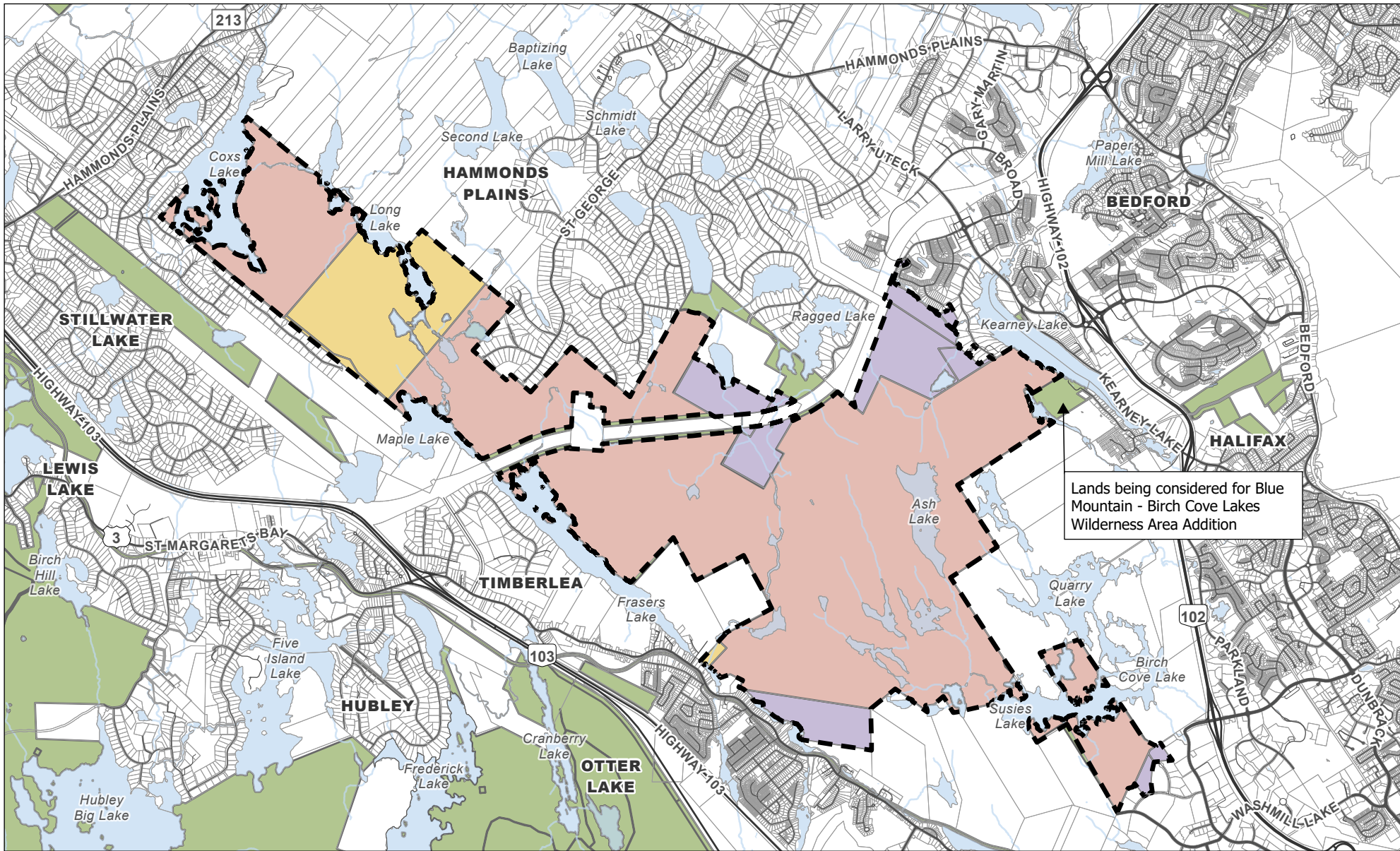
The diagram below outlines the process for the designation of national urban parks within Canada. The approach to each step will be flexible and informed by the local context.



Pre-Feasibility	Planning	Designation	Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek interest and support from local governments and other partners, including Indigenous governments and organizations Co-develop engagement approach with Indigenous partners Identify the study area(s) for the national urban park Conduct site-specific studies Explore considerations for vision, boundary, and governance Conduct initial stakeholder outreach <p>Expected Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Candidate site found to align with program objectives, with sufficient support from local partners to be feasible as a national urban park <p>Deliverables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre-feasibility report published by Parks Canada (Represents Parks Canada's conclusion that pre-feasibility is concluded and the project is ready to move into planning) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a park vision Determine governance model with partners Refine study area to identify park boundary Conduct stakeholder and public engagement Prepare draft budget and identify priority investments Begin initial operational planning <p>Expected Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement to proceed to negotiation <p>Deliverables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summary of stakeholder and public engagement published Budget and investment plan prepared in draft MOU (non-binding) signed between Parks Canada and key partners (Represents a significant commitment to next steps and negotiating details) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalize proposal for the national urban park Confirm roles of partners in governance of the national urban park Secure operational funding from funding partners (e.g. federal government, other jurisdictions) Develop operational plan <p>Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National urban park designated under <i>National Urban Parks Policy</i> <p>Deliverables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational plan completed Funding confirmed MOAs (binding) signed (to formalize national urban park partnership) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final operational preparations for the national urban park, may include implementing governance structure; designing facilities, amenities and programs; and initiating conservation activities Begin operations of the national urban park, including development of infrastructure, staffing, development of management plan, and official opening <p>Expected Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> National urban park officially launched


Foundational Investments (if applicable, may occur during these phases)

- Pursue investments (e.g., land acquisition, restoration, infrastructure) in alignment with program objectives



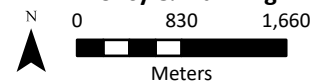
Lands being considered for Blue Mountain - Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area Addition

BMBCL Partnership Lands Map

-  Partnership Lands Boundary
-  Nova Scotia Nature Trust Lands
-  Province of Nova Scotia Designated Wilderness Area
-  HRM Lands
-  Other Provincial Crown Lands

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Date: 3/8/2023