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Item No. 13.1.3

**Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee
June 26, 2025**

TO: Chair and Members of Community Planning and Economic Development
Standing Committee

FROM: Brad Anguish, Commissioner of Operations

DATE: June 10, 2025

SUBJECT: **Park Steward Program**

ORIGIN

June 8, 2021, Meeting of Regional Council motion (Item 11.7.2)

MOVED by Councillor Austin, seconded by Councillor Morse

THAT Halifax Regional Council request a staff report on a park stewards program to facilitate citizen volunteering in HRM parks.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED UNANIMOUSLY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the June 8, 2021 Regional Council meeting, Councillor Austin requested a staff report on the potential to establish a park stewardship and volunteer program to increase community involvement in the care and maintenance of municipal parks. While some local volunteer initiatives exist, including naturalization and community gardening programs, and occasional community park cleanups, the municipality does not have a formal framework for coordinating citizen involvement in park stewardship.

The municipality has over 900 parks, ranging from small neighborhood parks to large wilderness areas. Park care and maintenance services are typically performed directly by municipal staff, delivered through contracted services, or in some cases, are undertaken through partnership arrangements with community organizations. There are limited instances of involvement by individuals or local groups in park stewardship.

A review of successful stewardship programs in other Canadian municipalities, such as in Vancouver and Mississauga, highlight the effectiveness of "Adopt-a-Park" programs and related volunteer-driven initiatives, which serve as models for Halifax. These programs involve individuals and local groups committing to regular park maintenance activities such as litter collection, horticultural planting, and invasive species removal. Such initiatives foster a sense of community and assist municipalities in improving and maintaining the condition of parks.

Based on the successes in other municipalities and with some local examples of volunteerism, a Park Stewardship Program is proposed, comprised of four components:

1. **Adopt-a-Park Program:** Individuals or local groups would commit to regular park oversight, including litter cleanups and possibly light gardening activities where such services are not already provided directly by the municipality, with support from staff and with recognition for long-term involvement.
2. **Parks Cleanup Program:** A less formal initiative would improve the ability for individuals and local groups to volunteer for park cleanups without long-term commitments. The Great NS Pick-Me-Up is an existing provincial-wide program that the municipality supports through its Solid Waste division, where volunteers already undertake cleanups within areas, including parks. This program would be promoted to a greater degree.
3. **Naturalization Program:** The existing program, which has citizens and organizations involved in environmental restoration projects focused on native plantings and habitat restoration, would be enhanced by being under the umbrella of the Park Stewardship Program, by way of promotion and the intake of volunteers.
4. **Community Gardens:** The existing program, where individuals create and tend to garden plots within parks as organized by community groups, would be enhanced largely by promoting the program and the location of community gardens and information about the groups.

The overall Park Stewardship Program would leverage existing municipal resources and use the municipality's existing volunteer webpage to establish a centralized online platform for registration, coordination, and promotion. Much of this involves improvements to existing services. It is foreseen that these can be established at its outset with existing resources and budgets.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Community Planning and Economic Development Standing Committee recommend that Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to develop the Park Stewardship Program as outlined in the discussion section of this report.

BACKGROUND

At the June 8, 2021 Regional Council meeting, Councillor Austin presented a motion requesting a staff report on the development of a park stewardship program to facilitate citizen volunteering in municipal parks. It was identified that while there are some areas of the municipality where community organizations have oversight over parks with service agreements, there are few opportunities for residents and groups to be involved in the stewardship of parks outside of these instances. It was further noted that a formal program, as there may be in other municipalities, could facilitate a broader array of citizen participation. The motion was passed by Regional Council.

DISCUSSION

The municipality has over 900 parks ranging from small local parks within residential settings to large wilderness parks. Responsibilities for the care of these parks fall to the municipality's Parks Operations staff who ensure playgrounds, courts, open areas, playing fields, horticultural beds, and other amenities are well maintained. There are approximately 130 full time equivalent staff (with some of these staff shared with Public Works for winter works) and 12 supervisors, resulting in an overall ratio of close to 80 parks per supervisor. Most maintenance is undertaken directly by municipal staff with some services delivered through contracts to private firms. There are also limited instances of partnership arrangements with community organizations in some areas of the municipality to undertake park management, which varies from playing field maintenance and scheduling, to trail development, maintenance, and promotion.

There are two formal municipal programs that enable local community-based involvement in parks:

- the recently established Naturalization Program that includes projects with volunteers to undertake environmental restoration projects focused on native plantings and habitat restoration; and
- the Community Gardening program enables community groups to establish garden plots that are allocated to residents within mostly municipal parks.

For the type of community-based park stewardship opportunities referenced by Regional Council, there have been occasions whereby residents and local groups have been involved in the care of parks. Parks Operations estimates that approximately six times per year, it responds to requests from community groups to undertake litter cleanups within parks, which it supports through the supply of refuse bags and gloves. Examples in recent years have included:

- Admiral Cove Park;
- Birches Park;
- Frenchman Lake Park;
- Penhorn Lake;
- Sackville River;
- West Bedford Parks; and
- Westwood Hills and Upper Tantallon.

In some instances, community groups have volunteered to plant and maintain horticultural beds. This has occurred in parks without such existing features or where planting and maintenance were being contracted out rather than delivered directly by municipal staff. In such instances, groups have been supported through means such as the purchasing of planting materials. There is no formal intake or registration for such community-based initiatives, and they occur without any promotion on the part of the municipality.

Park Stewardship in Other Municipalities

Research was undertaken to determine the presence of park stewardship and volunteer programs within prominent Canadian municipalities through a review of websites (Attachment A). Interviews occurred with municipalities with programs which were found to be applicable to HRM. From this, common types of stewardship and volunteer programs were found as follows:

Adopt A Greenspace / Park

In several municipalities, 'adopt a' programs are in place for community members interested in volunteering to care for and maintain selected, or 'adopted', parks. Activities typically include enhanced maintenance such as regular litter cleanups that augment the services provided by municipal staff. Volunteers are the eyes on the park and make an ongoing commitment to its maintenance that is often over a minimum duration of one-to-two-years. Groups may be recognized through signs within parks and on municipal websites. Through the review of prominent Canadian cities, 'Adopt a' programs were found in Brampton, Calgary, Hamilton, Edmonton, London, Mississauga, Ottawa, Regina, Vancouver, Victoria, Winnipeg, and Yellowknife.

Community Cleanups

Cleanup volunteer opportunities are intended to be undertaken by individuals, groups, and corporations. Often, municipalities will provide supplies and equipment to participants. Annual cleanup days and activities are organized in some municipalities, while others respond to local events that may be organized by individual groups. Community Cleanup initiatives in various forms were found within most of the municipalities that were reviewed.

Invasive Species Removal

Some municipalities have developed programs to remove invasive plant species in parks and greenspaces. Often, these may be undertaken by volunteers associated with non-profit organizations or conservation groups, with municipal support. Through discussions with other municipalities, it was often cited that participants in such removal programs are essential, as the frequency and growth of these plants often exceeds the capacity of staff to address them. Municipal invasive species removal programs currently occur in Calgary, Edmonton, London, Mississauga, and Victoria.

Notable Programs in other Municipalities

In reviewing stewardship in other municipalities, there are two programs in Vancouver and Mississauga that are notable for their successes and highlight the significance that volunteerism has within those cities.

Vancouver

Volunteer programming in Vancouver stands out as volunteers are relied on extensively in a range of services, which include, though are not limited to:

- 'adopt a' programs (blocks, catch basin, parks, streets, snow angels, trees);
- community cleanups organized by city staff;
- neighbourhood cleanup parties organized by community groups / members; and
- park fundraising.

The community volunteering programming in Vancouver has high rates of community participation, with options for residents and groups to choose from programs on their availability and interest. Notably:

- in 2024, over 48,000 volunteers participated in cleanup programs;
- an 'adopt a' program is connected to a platform which manages the intake and distribution of volunteer information to the respective staff members responsible for overseeing various service areas; and
- there are on-line maps to identify parks where stewardship groups are already active, and other parks that are available for selection.

Mississauga

Residents of Mississauga are encouraged to apply for a range of volunteer opportunities, which include, though are not limited to the following:

- forestry;
- invasive species removal;
- libraries;
- parks; and
- recreation centres.

Residents submit their application to volunteer through a centralized intake platform, managed by a volunteer coordinator who coordinates with each municipal business unit to ensure volunteers have adequate training and support. Parks and Forestry historically account for organizing nearly 10,000 volunteers annually in Mississauga. A particularly compelling component of the volunteer opportunities in the city is for the removal of invasive species, which Mississauga staff explained, managed to collect over 200 bags of invasive species in parks and forested areas in 2024, which would not have otherwise been removed.

Related Local Precedent Programs

One of the closest local examples of a widespread "adopt a" program is the province's "Adopt a Highway" ([Nova Scotia Adopt-A-Highway](#)). The program as outlined, "gives volunteers the opportunity to adopt a section of a roadway for a three-year period. During this time, volunteers agree to complete two clean-ups per year, usually one in the spring and one in the fall. After three years, you can renew your contract or disband your group. Signage is also given to our volunteer groups at either end of their adopted section after two clean-ups have been completed."

A related initiative, the "Great NS Pick-Me-Up program" is identified as, "a one-time litter facilitation program. You register a clean-up for an approved roadway, beach, shoreline, park, trail, or community of your choosing, complete the clean-up, and are in no way obligated to do it again in the same location. You can register for as many or as few clean-ups throughout the province as you'd like."

Both programs have intake registration portals that include the ability to select area for projects and readily obtain approvals and waivers. Mapping for the Adopt-A-Highway program identifies that there have been extensive numbers of groups and organizations throughout the province, which serves to illustrate the

interest of volunteerism related to beautification and improvement of the environment in a Nova Scotia context. The “Great NS Pick-Me Up program” mapping identifies the team leaders and information about scheduled events.

Under these programs there have been initiatives within the municipality, with approximately 150 annual events across HRM with over 2,750 volunteers participating in cleanup efforts. These are delivered in partnership with the municipality’s Solid Waste division which ensures supplies are available to any resident or local group that is cleaning litter. Collected waste can be retrieved as part of scheduled curbside collections or registered participants can deposit waste at the Otter Lake Waste Facility, where tipping fees are waived. In other instances, with advanced notice, waste is retrieved and disposed of by Solid Waste staff. Supplies for such cleanups are regularly available through Halifax Public Library branches and HRM Customer Service Centres. Many cleanup events already regularly occur within the municipality’s parks, organized by citizens, community groups, companies, and some municipal councillors. The municipality has a webpage with an outline of the program, but parks and other open space cleanups could be further enhanced through better promotion by the municipality.

Benefits of Stewardship and Volunteerism

Organizations such as Volunteer NS, Volunteer Canada, and Volunteer Management Professionals of Canada have literature and resources that identify the benefits of volunteerism. When considered relative to park stewardship, these include:

Participant Benefits, such as:

- emotional wellbeing and social connections;
- personal growth and skill development;
- physical activity; and
- sense of community.

Community Benefits, such as:

- neighbourhood connections;
- environmental impact;
- enhanced public spaces; and
- public outreach and education.

Proposed Stewardship Program

Based on the review of stewardship programs in other places, and building upon existing programs within the municipality, there are four initial areas for community-based groups and individuals to be more involved in the stewardship of parks through a formal program. An Adopt-a-Park program and a Parks Cleanup program are identified as new initiatives, and the existing Naturalization and Community Garden programs are highlighted as programs to be encapsulated within a proposed Park Stewardship Program.

Adopt-a-Park

As highlighted in the examples in other places, a program is proposed by which individuals and groups would be able to “adopt-a-park”. They would sign-up to undertake regular oversight and maintenance that may at a basic level, include litter cleanups, but which could also extend to other activities such as horticultural bed planting where such services are not already undertaken directly by Parks Operations staff.

Components of the proposed Adopt-a-Park program are envisioned to include:

- promotion through the municipality’s website, social media, and other means;
- lists, and if possible, an on-line map resource tool of parks that are available to be selected for adoption;
- an intake registration process for individuals and groups that includes a commitment to the program for a minimum of two years with bi-annual cleanups being a requirement for participation;
- support from staff to include refuse bags, gloves, and guidance;

- staff involvement in any park issues that exceed regular stewardship responsibilities as reported by park stewardship individuals and groups;
- promotion of any large-scale cleanup events being undertaken by a group; and
- recognition for participation, which may include acknowledgements through the municipality's website and park signage, and other means that may be determined with the initiation of the program.

The proposed Adopt-a-Park program would apply to most of the municipality's parks with some exceptions for select parks such as the Public Gardens where specialized care and maintenance are necessary. Parks would range in size and type, from local parks to wilderness parks.

It is foreseen that existing Parks Operations resources and budgets would be able to support the program along with possible collaboration with Solid Waste. This would be revisited if interest expands.

Parks Cleanup

Unlike the Adopt-A-Park program, the Parks Cleanup program is envisioned to be available to participants on a more casual basis, without a required term of commitment. This would occur through the existing Great Nova Scotia Pick-Me-Up Program, with greater promotion by the municipality.

Naturalization

The municipality's Naturalization program has similar attributes to the prospective Adopt-a-Park program in involving individuals and groups within parks but specifically for environmental restoration projects focused on native plantings and habitat restoration. Encapsulating and promoting the Naturalization program under the umbrella of the proposed Park Stewardship Program allows the same type of structure as the Adopt-a-Park program. Projects being suggested by groups or led by the municipality can be promoted and channelled through an intake portal for interested participants.

Community Gardens

Community Gardens can be established in most of the municipality's parks and are organized by community groups with the support of Parks and Recreation's Community Developers. Individuals who may be looking to obtain a garden bed currently engage directly with community groups. There is a foreseen opportunity for the municipality to enhance this program both by encapsulating it within the proposed Park Stewardship Program and promoting it in the same manner as the Adopt-a-Park and Naturalization programs. Information about existing community gardens sites and the contact information for community groups is already done through the municipality's website but can be enhanced by on-line mapping and increased promotion.

Platform and Promotion

It is foreseen that the municipality's Volunteer webpage would be enhanced to be a portal for each of the individual programs identified under the Park Stewardship Programs. This would provide a centralized location for individuals, community groups, companies and other to be able to view the complete range of volunteer opportunities in parks. It can also be further enhanced as the central portal for other existing volunteer programs within the municipality, or those that may be developed in the future.

The stewardship and related volunteer programs outlined in this report would be promoted by the municipality through its website, social media, and other means. This would occur on an ongoing basis, with a particular emphasis in late winter and early spring.

Future Possible Initiatives

With a growing concern from community members, it is foreseeable an invasive species removal program could be included with future park volunteer opportunities. Preliminary discussions with staff from Environment & Climate Change have occurred, though the details on delivery of a program with support of non-profit organizations or conservation agencies remains to be determined.

Program Modifications

The intent of the Park Stewardship Program is to be responsive to residents interested in supporting parks

in their respective communities. It is anticipated that the proposed volunteer program will evolve over time, relative to the interests expressed by program participants.

Appreciation

Whether residents volunteer time toward short-term or long-term projects, it is foreseen that there will be a benefit to recognizing volunteers. Through discussions with other jurisdictions, recognition is a significant factor in retaining a strong volunteer base and growing programs. To implement an appreciation component to a volunteer program, additional funding would need to be allocated. The amount of funding required will depend on the level of participation, which is not known until the Park Stewardship Program is implemented.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Based on the review of stewardship and volunteer programs in other municipalities and building upon informal existing volunteering interest in parks, there is value in implementing the Park Stewardship Program as outlined in this report. Few additional resources are necessary to implement the overall program on an initial basis. Analysis and monitoring of participation will help to understand its success and determine future implications on future budgets.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no initial financial implications to the development of the proposed Park Stewardship Program outlined in this report, which can initially be accomplished with existing resources. Any significant interest in the program that initially exceeds the capacity of existing resources can be mitigated in the short-term by controlling the intake of participants until additional resources are determined. Staff will return with a subsequent report to outline the financial implications and seek approval of hiring additional staff if the elements of Program have sustained popularity into the future.

RISK CONSIDERATION

There are few immediate risks with the report's recommendation, which is largely to further develop and improve the organization and promotion of the stewardship of parks within the municipality.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

This report has been informed by the experiences that Parks Operations staff have had with community volunteers.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Implementation of this program should have a positive impact on the environment.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Regional Council could choose to direct the Chief Administrative Officer to modify the scope of the proposed Park Stewardship Program as outlined in this report. This may necessitate a further staff report.
2. Regional Council could choose not to adopt the proposed Park Stewardship Program as outlined in this report, thereby retaining the limited existing scope of instances of stewardship within parks.

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.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A Notable Canadian Cities: Park Stewardship and Volunteer Programs

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Notable Canadian Cities: Park Stewardship and Volunteer Programs

City	Program Components / Volunteer Positions	Characteristics / Summary
Surrey	Partners in Parks Parks Events Assistant Surrey Youth Stewardship Squad	Volunteer coordinator involved with intake and oversight of program participants, which is integrated with a centralized intake platform.
Vancouver	Adopt A programs Green streets Graffiti management	Volunteer match quiz available to residents which investigates their various interests and personality type to ensure opportunities available for volunteering are appropriate. Users submit their information through a centralized intake platform to manage participation.
Victoria	Naturalists program Restoration volunteers Trail ambassadors Short term projects • Park clean ups • Invasive species removal • Plantings	Volunteer coordinator Park steward activity report • intended for volunteers to submit to volunteer activities along with locations, date and time, observations along with matters to be addressed if needed Newsletters used to communicate with existing and potential volunteers
Calgary	Park Stewards • Greet and answer questions of park visitors – animal, plants, cultural history of area Litter clean up Adopt a Park Adopt a Rink • Flooding a local community developed rink in a park Green Initiatives Restore habitat – tree and shrub planting, wiring, invasive species removal, painting projects	Centralized intake platform available through Calgary's website to guide and manage volunteers. Additionally, Calgary has volunteer opportunities available through a local parks foundation involved in fund development, design and construction of parks in Calgary.
Edmonton	Partners in Parks program	Volunteer registration through website and central email for program inquiries.
Yellowknife	Adopt a street does exist to manage litter	Opportunities and contact information are available through a municipal website.
Regina	Adopt A Greenspace • Litter pick up • Spring cleaning	Equipment loan program for small hand tools and supplies from city operations. Application forms are available online for residents.

Notable Canadian Cities: Park Stewardship and Volunteer Programs

	• Maintain traffic islands (mowing, watering, flowerbeds) • Shrub bed maintenance • Graffiti and dirt removal	
Saskatoon	Community Association Volunteers – flooding rinks, cleaning up parks	Handbooks and central contact information are available online.
Winnipeg	Adopt A Park • Individuals, families, neighbours, corporations, schools, encourage to keep spaces “GREEN” • Litter pick up • Weeding of beds • Raking protective areas of playgrounds • Spring and fall cleanups	Additional program inquiries are managed through 311 as well as information sheet and online registration.
Brampton	Adopt A Park Parks Cleanup	Programs are promoted and managed through an online portal. Within the cleanup programming, there are options for procuring supplies for cleanup programs as well as a platform to input participation information.
Hamilton	Adopt A Park Community Tree Planting Community Clean Up Trailer Team Up and Clean Up	Programs are overseen by a coordinator for promotional, educational, and supervising purposes. Programming is both long term and short term, based on the interest levels of participants.
London	NeighbourGood London • Adopt-A-Park • London Clean and Green • Community Gardens • Block Party in a Box • Neighbourhood Safety Audit • Neighbourhood Managed Ice Rinks	Broadly comparable to programs across the country with additional dedicated staffing and standalone web presence to promote and manage the program with the intention of it being more user friendly.
Mississauga	Adopt A Park Parks • Clean ups with equipment at recreation facilities Forestry • Invasive species	This program has a single coordinator overseeing intake and allocation of volunteers. The intake process is supported by an online volunteer management platform. Once volunteers are allocated, their efforts are supported by staff as a portion of their responsibilities.

Notable Canadian Cities: Park Stewardship and Volunteer Programs

Ottawa	Adopt a Park • Cleaning debris and litter • Sweeping pathways • Pulling weeds • Reporting vandalism	Central program contact and fillable forms are available to residents online.
Toronto	Trails • Rerouting trails • Covering exposed roots • Build safe and sustainable water crossing • Install trail components • Plant native trees and shrubs • Close trails for regeneration Community Steward • Education regarding ecology and ecological monitoring • Training workshops • Trail design workshops	Trail equipment and training provided to program participants as well as a staff contact through central email.
Waterloo	Partners in Parks Community Planting Community Vegetable Gardens	Program coordinator available to provide oversight of intake, allocation, and education of volunteers.
Montreal	Urban Park Champions	Though not a program delivered through municipal government, this program solicits interested residents to promote urban green spaces in communities while encouraging visitors to explore, protect, and improve these spaces.
Saint John	Green Machine	A trailer is brought to events in parks to facilitate community clean up and park maintenance efforts.
Cape Breton Regional Municipality	Great Cape Breton Clean Up	Programming is an extension of the Great NS Pick Me Up.

*Research included searches of municipal websites for volunteer programs within parks and open spaces using terms such as 'volunteer'; 'volunteer program'; 'stewardship'; 'park stewardship'; 'park volunteer'; 'clean up'; 'beautification'