



REPORT NO: DS 2021-014

TO: COUNCIL

SUBMITTED BY: Harold O’Krafka, MCIP RPP
Director of Development Services

Sandy Jackson,
Director of Parks, Facilities & Recreation Services

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Director of Corporate Services

PREPARED BY: Harold O’Krafka, MCIP RPP
Director of Development Services

REVIEWED BY: Grant Whittington, CAO

DATE: April 12, 2021

SUBJECT: Mike Schout Wetlands Preserve
Draft Concept Plan

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Council endorse the conceptual design presented by Mike Schout, and his wetlands designer Phil Holst, thereby allowing him to proceed with obtaining the necessary regulatory approvals for the design of the Mike Schout Wetlands Preserve;

That Council support the immediate implementation of Stage 1 being the planting of approximately 4000 trees in the reforestation areas as per the collaboration between Mr. Schout, GRCA and Forests Ontario; and,

THAT staff be directed to continue to provide assistance, as required, to advance the design and approvals in accordance with Township Official Plan and Wilmot Trails Master Plan and report back to Council upon receipt of the necessary approvals with a report on the full staging of construction, estimated costs and implementation plan.

SUMMARY:

Council previously authorized Mike Schout to proceed with the design of a naturalization project on 55ac of Township owned lands fronting Smith's Creek Drive in New Hamburg.

Originally the site was planned as a Carbon Sink for the larger community predicated on the two-fold objective of utilizing the site to sequester carbon through the planting of trees and as a passive recreational area through the development of walking trails.

Council endorsed Mr. Schout's enhanced vision for the site to design a multi-faceted recreational and naturalization project which will provide enhanced stormwater management for a significant portion of the New Hamburg community, improve the river water quality, provide habitat for birds and aquatic life, provide flood storage opportunities to potentially offset smaller flood events and possibly help minimize the downstream effects in the core area, and to provide recreational and educational opportunities for the community in addition to the beneficial aspects of carbon sequestration.

Over the last 1.5 years Mr. Schout has worked with his design team, staff of the Grand River Conservation Authority and staff of the Township to create a concept that would implement his vision for the site.

Subject to endorsement of that concept by Council, regulatory approvals will be sought and an implementation staging plan will be prepared to leverage Mr. Schout's financial investment in the project and to provide opportunities for local residents to participate in the construction of the project.

A first stage of reforestation is planned to proceed immediately through a partnership between Mr. Schout, the GRCA and Forests Ontario. Approximately 4,000 trees will be planted on the site in the spring of 2021 at no cost to the Township.

REPORT:

The Township owns lands having frontage on Smith's Creek Drive in New Hamburg which are currently rented for agricultural purposes. The lands were acquired by the Township at no cost as a condition of approval of the Smith's Creek (Sunvest Holdings) subdivision.

The lands are wholly within the flood plain of the Nith River and contain an existing stormwater management facility that discharges via a ditch system directly to the Nith River.

The Wilmot Trails Master Plan (WTMP), approved in November of 2013, identified trail development within the property as a priority within the 0 to 5 year time frame. The development of an RFP for trail design services was initiated in early 2019 but was put on hold pending the outcome of the discussions with Mr. Schout on his participation and funding of the project.

Additionally, the Township had successfully made application to the Community Environmental Fund (RMOW) in October of 2018 for funding of design activities on the subject lands as a planned Carbon Sink / Naturalization Area. Again, the progression to an RFP for that project was delayed pending the outcome of the discussions with Mr. Schout.

In addition to the potential to sequester a significant amount of CO₂, through reforestation opportunities, the original project envisioned that the naturalization of the lands would have an added benefit of improving water quality in the Nith River by eliminating a source of fertilizers, pesticides and siltation through the removal of agricultural activities adjacent to the river.

Through the incorporation of trails, walkways and lookouts the project was deemed to have the opportunity to provide recreational and educational opportunities as well for the local and regional community.

At the time of the 2019 Capital Budget staff advised of a potential partnership with a Community Champion. Over the next few months Township staff, GRCA staff, Ducks Unlimited staff and Mike Schout of Schout Communities toured not only the subject site but also toured other Ducks Unlimited project sites in the Woodstock area to develop a concept of how a design and implementation partnership between Mike Schout and the Township of Wilmot (as landowner) could be developed to advance the project.

On September 23, 2019 Council was advised that through these discussions Mike Schout had confirmed that he would like to contribute to the project in the amount of \$1.5 million and proceed with the engineering design, approvals and construction of the project to facilitate the construction of what promises to be a very special and unique project for our community.

Council was advised that, upon completion of the design and approvals exercise, an implementation plan would be developed to leverage and supplement the estimated \$1.5 million investment by Mike Schout through a variety of funding mechanisms including government and private grants and donations.

In recognition of Mike Schout's generous donation and investment in the future health and well-being of both the community and our natural environment Council endorsed the project and resolved that the project would be named the Mike Schout Wetlands Park.

Since that time Mr. Schout has worked with former Wilmot resident Phil Holst on creating and refining a conceptual design for the project. Mr. Schout has advanced, and funded, a number of technical analysis to aid in the design work including having the site elevations mapped using a drone and having test pits dug at a number of locations to determine soil stratigraphy as well as ground water levels. Through consultations with the Grand River Conservation Authority, who regulate the site, and various Township departments respecting their areas of expertise, a 'draft' concept has been prepared for Council's endorsement. The concept is attached as Attachment 1 to this report and will be described in detail by Mr. Schout and Mr. Holst for Council.

A link to the Council presentation will be posted to the Township website following the Council meeting to allow all residents and interested parties to hear the description of the design details.



Site Meeting – March 2021

Subject to the endorsement of the concept, by Council, the design team will proceed to obtain the necessary regulatory approvals to allow for the implementation of the design to proceed.

Through the approvals process the concept may require additional minor modifications but significant changes are not anticipated. Following the approvals, staff will return to Council with an implementation staging plan for the project including opportunities to leverage the investment of Mr. Schout and opportunities for the public to participate and engage in the implementation – subject of course to Covid-19 restrictions.

Having said that, Mr. Schout and his team have been able to secure a partnership with the GRCA and Forests Ontario to implement Stage 1 of the design immediately upon Council's endorsement. Stage 1 will involve the planting of approximately 4,000 trees in the reforestation areas of the design this spring at no cost to the Township. No regulatory approvals are required for the planting of trees.

The name of the project has been changed to Mike Schout Wetlands Preserve to recognize and embrace Mr. Schout's vision that "firstly and foremost this a protected habitat and feeding environment for birds, animals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, micro-organisms, and insects and a growing & reproduction place for plants."

ALIGNMENT WITH THE TOWNSHIP OF WILMOT STRATEGIC PLAN:

This project has the unique potential to incorporate many of the goals of the Wilmot Strategic plan by protecting and enhancing our natural environment, supplementing our enjoyment of our quality of life, engaging our community in the implementation of the project and promoting a prosperous economy which balances the protection of the environment with economic growth.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Allowing Mike Schout to proceed with engineering design and approvals has had no immediate fiscal impacts on the Township of Wilmot beyond the staff resources required to provide support to the exercise.

Future implementation may have fiscal impacts which would be identified in the implementation plan that will be prepared following regulatory approvals. Operational stages will have fiscal impacts which will also be identified in the implementation plan. Specific capital investments would be brought forward through normal budgetary processes.

The existing lease of the subject lands expired in 2019 and a one year extension was given for 2020 during the design phase. No lease of the lands would be given for agricultural purposes moving forward.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A: Draft Concept of Mike Schout Wetlands Preserve

Attachment A

LEGEND

- BOARDWALK / TRAIL
- WETLAND BORDER
- DEEP WATER
- POLLINATIVE MEADOW
- REFORESTATION
- TALL STOCK TREES / SHRUBS
- LOOK OUT RIFFLES
- EXCAVATED SOIL



MIKE SCHOUT WETLANDS PRESERVE
DRAFT CONCEPT PLAN
APRIL 2021