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YORK REGIONAL FOREST ACCESSIBLE TRAIL INITIATIVE

The Transportation Services Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report dated April 4, 2010, from the Commissioner of Transportation Services.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council endorse the implementation of a one-kilometre, fully accessible loop trail in the Hollidge Tract of the York Regional Forest, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville, including parking, signage and trail improvements at a cost of \$85,000.
2. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of the local municipalities.

2. PURPOSE

This report provides Regional Council with an update on the York Regional Forest Accessible Trail Initiative, and seeks approval to implement trail improvements to provide access to persons with disabilities.

3. BACKGROUND

The Region owns and manages 2,200 hectares of York Regional Forest. The properties have been in public ownership for many years, with some dating back to the 1920s. The Regional Forest consists of 20 properties and includes over 120 kilometres of trails. The forest accommodates a variety of interests and uses including environmental protection, sustainable forest management, wildlife habitat, passive recreation and public education programs. A user survey completed in 2007 identified that over 1,600 people visit the forest on a daily basis. The most common forest uses are walking and dog walking, accounting for 60% of its utilization.

The York Regional Forest can provide a unique “Nature Experience” to persons with disabilities

In 2008, the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee requested that staff evaluate opportunities to provide an accessible trail(s) in the York Regional Forest. The York Regional Forest has the opportunity to provide a unique “Nature Experience” to persons with disabilities. Any experience in improving accessibility is recognized as a learning and leadership opportunity for the Region.

With the assistance of the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee and the Regional Forest Advisory Team, an accessible trail loop was identified in the Hollidge Tract

Staff made presentations on trail accessibility in the York Regional Forest to the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee in February 2008 and again in February 2009. In 2009, a York Regional Forest -Trails Accessibility Sub-Committee, comprised of members from the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee, the Regional Forest Advisory Team (RFAT) and staff, was formed. The sub-committee met in August 2009 to investigate the opportunities to provide an accessible trail in the Regional Forest. Based on a staff assessment of various forest tracts, a preferred location was identified in the Hollidge Tract (*Attachment 1*). This tract was chosen because of its proximity to urban centres, public popularity, and the quality and aesthetics of the nature experience and trail. In October 2009, a field tour was held with sub-committee members to discuss site suitability and trail enhancement options.

The preferred location is a one-kilometre loop that travels through a variety of forest communities (*Attachment 2*). The existing conditions of the preferred trail are conducive to providing an accessible trail. This location would also benefit program participants in the Regional Forest outdoor education program, Nature's Classroom. The Trails Accessibility Sub-Committee agreed with the selection of the preferred location.

To identify the accessibility improvements required, a detailed assessment of the trail was completed using the draft Built Environment Standard and the services of an accessibility consultant. The results of the assessment were used to generate several options for trail improvements.

The Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act draft Built Environment Standard sets the requirements for fully accessible trails

The *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (AODA) through its draft Built Environment Standard, sets the requirements for fully accessible trails. The standard identifies maximum slopes (cross slopes and running slopes), suitable trail surface conditions, minimum trail widths and signage requirements for accessible trails. It is not anticipated that the final standard will include legislated requirements for the Region to retrofit existing trails for accessibility. However, accessibility will be a consideration for any new trail construction.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

ACCESSIBLE TRAIL OPTIONS

Five options were developed to consider trail accessibility enhancements at the Hollidge Tract (*Table 1*).

Table 1
Summary of Trail Accessibility Improvement Options

Option #	Enhancements	Cost
1	None	0
2	Accessibility signage	\$10,000
3	Signage and two accessible parking spaces	\$17,000
4	Signage, parking, some trail improvements	\$55,000
5	Signage, parking and a fully accessible trail	\$85,000

Option One – Do nothing - maintain existing conditions

The current AODA draft regulation for the Built Environment does not require the Region to upgrade existing trails in the York Regional Forest. Based on the feedback received from the trails sub-committee, the existing trail at the Hollidge Tract does provide some accessibility for persons with disabilities, depending on the nature of the disability, and individuals comfort level and skills. The key limitations include a lack of information on the trail, a soft trail surface (sand), and slope concerns. Option one proposes to maintain the existing level of accessibility. No trail improvements or signage are proposed with this option. There are no costs associated with this option.

Option Two – Accessibility signage, cost \$10,000

During consultation with the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee, the lack of information on trail conditions was identified as a major barrier to accessibility. Option Two proposes to maintain existing trail conditions and install signage to inform forest users of the trail conditions. Signage would follow the Universal Trail Assessment Protocol (UTAP). This protocol is an international standard developed for communicating accessibility to persons with disabilities. This signage would be compliant with the AODA draft Built Environment Standard. This option would not alter the actual trail conditions, but would improve accessibility through the provision of trail condition information to the user.

The estimated cost to implement Option Two is \$10,000. This would include the preparation of signage and installation at key locations.

Option Three – Installation of accessibility signage and accessible parking, cost \$17,000

Option three includes the installation of signage and provides two accessible parking spaces at the trail entrance along with the trail signage proposed in Option Two.

The estimated cost to implement Option Three is \$17,000

Option Four – Signage, accessible parking and trail improvements, cost \$55,000

Option Four includes, signage, accessible parking and improvements to the trail surface and cross slope.

Staff reviewed a variety of trail surface types, including granular and asphalt treatments, for an accessible trail. Based on the review, a compacted granular surface was identified as the most desirable surface treatment. A compacted granular surface (e.g. limestone screenings or crushed concrete) is a product which is more compatible with the forest environment, and should minimize potential conflicts with wildlife and tree roots. The compacted granular surface for the trail meets the requirements of the AODA draft Built Environment Standard, is aesthetically pleasing for a natural setting, provides suitable drainage and is easily maintained. This trail will be maintained in the same manner as other Regional Forest trails. Access to trails is limited during certain periods due to snow or wet conditions.

While the application of the granular material to the trail would increase accessibility, by providing a firm and stable path and grading out the cross slope, the trail would not meet the proposed standards for full accessibility. The standard requires that the trail running slopes (trail grade) can not exceed a 5% slope. Without grading (flattening) steeper segments along the trail, this slope criteria would not be met for approximately 25% (250 metres) of the trail. A quarter of the trail exceeds the standard by being between a 5% and 12% slope.

The estimated cost to implement Option Four is \$55,000.

Option Five – Fully accessible trail, cost \$85,000

Option Five would implement signage, accessible parking, improvements to the trail surface and cross slope, and also include grading to eliminate steep sections of the trail. To fully meet the AODA draft Built Environment Standard, the running slope (trail grade) must not exceed 5%. Portions of the trail (approx. 25%) would need to be graded to meet the standard.

The estimated cost of Option Five, which fully meets the AODA draft Built Environment Standard is \$85,000.

ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

Both the Accessibility Advisory Committee and the Regional Forest Advisory Team were consulted in terms of the types, scope and extent of accessibility enhancements to help develop the options.

While Option Four (\$55,000) does offer reasonable improvements in accessibility, the additional cost of Option Five, \$85,000, would provide significantly more benefits to the residents of York Region. Option Five was supported by the Regional Forest Advisory Team, and was recently supported by the Accessibility Advisory Committee at their April 21, 2010 meeting. Staff recommend endorsement of Option Five. The intent would be to advance this project in 2010 using funds from within the existing approved capital budget..

The implementation of the fully accessible trail will provide valuable information for the consideration of future accessible trails in the Regional Forest.

Marketing and monitoring will be critical to the success of an accessible trail

To ensure that persons with disabilities are aware of the accessible trail, the Region will undertake marketing of the trail through a variety of initiatives including website updates, York Regional Forest publications, and with advice from the Accessibility Advisory Committee. Monitoring public use and trail conditions will be undertaken to evaluate the level of use and to ensure the trail remains accessible.

Relationship to Vision 2026

The provision of accessible trails in the York Regional Forest addresses several goal areas of Vision 2026, including “Quality Communities for a Diverse Population”, “Enhanced Environment, Heritage and Culture”, and “Responding to the Needs of our Residents”.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of a fully accessible trail (Option Five) will require \$85,000 in funding. The intent is to source the funding for this project from within the 2010 approved capital budget. Once completed, any ongoing maintenance of the accessible trail will be undertaken within the existing Natural Heritage and Forestry Services annual operating budget.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

This accessibility trail enhancement will provide persons with disabilities the opportunity to experience the York Regional Forest trail system. In addition, this opportunity will help provide information, and a demonstration location, for municipalities advancing accessible trails and facilities in local parks and on conservation lands. Copies of this report will be forwarded to local municipalities for information.

7. CONCLUSION

To provide improved access to the York Regional Forest for persons with disabilities, the establishment of a one-kilometre fully accessible trail is recommended at the Hollidge Tract. The assessment of the accessible trail has been completed with input from the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee and the Regional Forest Advisory Team. This accessibility retrofit pilot project is recognized as a learning and leadership opportunity for the Region. Subject to Council direction, the intention is to advance the project this year with funds from within the existing 2010 approved capital budget.

For more information on this report, please contact Ian D. Buchanan, Manager of Natural Heritage and Forestry Services at Ext. 5204.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(The two attachments referred to in this clause were included in the agenda for the May 5, 2010 Committee meeting.)

Location Map York Regional Forest Accessible Trail Initiative

LEGEND

- Multi-Lane Provincial Highway
- Provincial Highway
- Road
- Railway
- Municipal Boundary
- Regional Boundary
- Lake *
- River *
- York Regional Forest Tracts
- Town or Village
- Urban Area

York Region

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