

Staff Report



Infrastructure Services Department

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REPORT TO: Community and Infrastructure Services Committee

DATE OF MEETING: April 24, 2023

SUBMITTED BY: Jeffery Silcox-Childs, 519-741-2600 ext. 4518

PREPARED BY: Josh Shea, Manager, Forestry & Natural Areas Management, 519-741-2600 ext. 4177

WARD(S) INVOLVED: Ward 3

DATE OF REPORT: April 5, 2023

REPORT NO.: INS-2023-181

SUBJECT: Wiijindamaan Indigenous Land Restoration Project at Pioneer Tower

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council direct staff to proceed with the proposed Land Restoration Project and authorize the General Manager, Infrastructure Services to sign agreement(s) with project partners, subject to review and satisfaction of the City solicitor.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the Wiijindamaan Indigenous Land Restoration project. The City of Kitchener is working collaboratively with local Indigenous organizations, White Owl Native Ancestry Association and Wisahkotewinoak Urban Indigenous Garden Collective organizations, and Conestoga College to enter into a partnership to restore the Pioneer Tower Natural Area..
- Discussions are nearing completion between the City, White Owl Native Ancestry Association and Conestoga College to finalize a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the project and between the City and Grand River Conservation Authority to finalize a maintenance agreement allowing the City and partners to manage the adjacent GRCA lands under the same guiding principles as the Wiijindamaan Indigenous Land Restoration project.
- Early stages of the physical land restoration are scheduled to commence in late Spring 2023.
- Conestoga College is the lead funder for this project through an NSERC research grant. Any financial implications related to the City's contributions will be absorbed within existing capital funding from our natural areas program. There is no additional or new funding being requested at this time.
- Community engagement will commence in spring 2023 and be co-led by the City and project partners. Engagement will be directed towards neighbourhoods in closest proximity to the project site to highlight and inform them about pending changes to the landscape and the intentions and objectives behind the land restoration. Conestoga College have engaged with Six Nations of the Grand First Nation and Mississauga's of the Credit First Nation to seek support for the project.
- This report supports the delivery of core services.

BACKGROUND:

In June 2022 Council was made aware of a pending agreement between City of Kitchener and Conestoga College to support land restoration activities at Pioneer Tower and to allow access to these lands for the College's Indigenous Studies Program (as well as other faculties) for purposes of education and land-based learning.

Pioneer Tower Natural Area is a 15-hectare property owned by the City of Kitchener and is currently managed as a natural area under the direction of the Forestry & Natural Areas team. This land will be the site being restored through this project. The property itself is comprised of lowland deciduous forest and meadow habitats as well as a large portion of fallow land located within the floodplain of the Grand River, which was previously under passive (row crop) agriculture and is currently planted with a clover-based cover crop. Immediately adjacent to these lands is natural area property owned by the GRCA which has been identified for inclusion within this project. Attachment A provides a map of the location.

The Wijiindamaan: An Indigenous Land-based Futurity Project is funded by a three-year NSERC (National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada) grant through Conestoga College. The City of Kitchener and other project partners will contribute in-kind support through knowledge sharing, project planning and coordination as well as through the support of staff resources and in sharing materials like woodchips, tree planting supplies, and other supplies.

Wijiindamaan is the innovative development and application of urban land co-management strategies rooted in traditional Indigenous land-based practices and knowledges. Building on work already accomplished by local grassroots Indigenous community organizations, this project will allow for enhanced coordinated effort among community partners (White Owl, Wisahtewinowak, Conestoga College and City of Kitchener) to create a land restoration project that secures and produces sustainable, traditional food and medicines, increases local biodiversity through habitat restoration and reintroduction of native species, builds community capacity, mobilizes knowledge, and exercises land co-management and relational agricultural practices on the land.

Starting in late spring 2023, once the MOU is finalized, a collaborative decision-making group with members from each partner group will be formed to oversee the implementation of a land restoration plan. This group will act as the steering body to support project governance and guide land restoration.

The land restoration will be staged over several years and guided by a Land Restoration Plan. Initial plans for the early phases include the establishment of food plots, planting of a fruit orchard, ceremonial space creation, and habitat restoration including prairie grass savannah.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports the delivery of core services.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

This project has no anticipated financial impacts. Any contributions from City of Kitchener towards the land restoration will be directed from existing natural area capital funding.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City's website with the agenda in advance of the council / committee meeting.

CONSULT – Consultation to date has been led by Conestoga College who have engaged Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation and Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation on this project and have received support to move forward. A land ceremony was held in summer 2022 with guests from Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation attending along with local Indigenous communities.

Some preliminary engagement and project introductions were also held in fall 2022 as part of a community feast event hosted by Conestoga College. People from local Indigenous communities were invited to the feast to learn more about the project and to share ideas and opportunities for collaboration.

Further consultation is planned for spring 2023 which will be co-led by all project partners. This effort will start with an invitation to people from the nearby neighbourhood to have them visit and tour the project site to understand the project intent, goals and planned activities. A sign will also be installed at the site informing people from nearby neighbourhoods that the lands of the Pioneer Tower Natural Area will be undergoing land restoration in partnership with Indigenous communities and Conestoga College.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

APPROVED BY: Denise McGoldrick, General Manager, Infrastructure Services

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A – Site Map Pioneer Tower Natural Area