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# Utopia Conservation Area Master Plan

January 2019

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*Friends of the*  
**UTOPIA**  
Gristmill & Park

**Nottawasaga Valley  
Conservation Authority**

## **Vision for the Future of the Utopia Conservation Area**

*The natural tranquility and beauty of the Utopia Conservation Area cannot be understated. The naturalized greenspace and wetlands, the abundant biodiversity, the inspiring heritage gristmill and its story across generations within the community --- all set in a place called UTOPIA – form the present-day elements and realities for which the vision and future direction of the Utopia Conservation Area West is based. Preserving, protecting and enhancing these elements is fundamental, offering exciting complementary recreational opportunities which are becoming evermore in demand. This conservation vision, one which can be celebrated across all generations, will help guide the decisions/activities/investments for the parkland for the next 25 years and beyond.*

## **Forward**

The development of Utopia Conservation Area Master Plan occurs at an important milestone that is reflective of numerous achievements realized through nearly three decades of financial and volunteer support by the Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park (Friends), the community stewards and lessees of the property, and the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority (NVCA), the owners of the property.

Working together, the Friends lease the western 20 ha portion of the conservation area and have maintained it as a publicly accessible greenspace. Significant features of the property include the unique, 155-year old gristmill, which is the only historically-designated property in Essa Township. The mill has incurred significant investment, having undergone extensive structural stabilization and aesthetic exterior renovations within the first phase of a multi-phase restoration plan for the gristmill.

With the Gristmill's first phase of renovations now completed, the Friends are taking the opportunity to review objectives for the entire property, including both natural and cultural heritage features. The plan will identify objectives for the management activities for the property that will conserve and enhance the conservation values while also balancing recreational opportunities while highlighting the history of the property.

While this Master Plan discusses both the eastern and western portions of the Utopia Conservation Area, the focus of the development plans are for the publicly accessible western portion of the property, for which the Friends hold the lease. The western portion includes the Utopia Dam, the Bell's Gristmill and the recreational trails. The eastern portion of the property is not accessible to the public.

## **Acknowledgements**

With support from the Rural Economic Development Fund of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs as well as the NVCA and the Township of Essa, Friends have undertaken the development of this Master Plan. The assessment builds on the NVCA's Master Plan prepared for the Utopia Conservation Area in the 1980s and reviews the priorities for community needs taking in to consideration the ecological features of the property.

A special thank you is extended to the Utopia Conservation Area Master Plan Advisory Committee for their efforts in bringing this Master Plan into fruition. Committee contributors include: Byron Wesson (NVCA), Kyra Howes (NVCA), Colleen Healey (Township of Essa), Floy Catt (community volunteer), Michael Lawler (community volunteer), Stephanie McCann (community volunteer), Joe Pantalone (volunteer coordinator), Paolo Brindley-Pantalone (planning and landscape architect student), Rocky Chew (Consultant - Structural Edge Engineering) and Susan Antler (chair of the Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park).

## **Partners**

### **Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority**

The Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority is a public agency dedicated to creating a healthy environment and communities through innovative watershed management.

NVCA is committed to protecting watershed communities from natural hazards like flooding and erosion and works to preserve and enhance watershed land and water resources. NVCA connects the communities with the watershed through nature-based educational and recreational opportunities.

As one of the 36 conservation authorities legislated by the Ontario Conservation Authorities Act, NVCA is governed by a board of directors appointed by their 18 member municipalities. Critical to their success is their strong partnerships with member municipalities, government agencies, community partners and local landowners.

NVCA's jurisdiction extends over the 3,700 km<sup>2</sup> of the Nottawasaga Valley watershed, excluding the lands within CFB Borden. The Nottawasaga River and its tributaries run from highlands on the Oak Ridges Moraine, Niagara Escarpment and Oro Moraine through the internationally significant Minesing Wetlands before flowing into Georgian Bay.

### **The Township of Essa**

The Township of Essa is a "lower tier" municipal government located in the County of Simcoe west of the City of Barrie. The township is bounded by County Road 90 to the north, County Road 27 to the east and Ontario Highway 89 to the south. The 280 km<sup>2</sup> municipal jurisdiction includes the Town of Angus (Essa's primary urban centre) and the settlements of Thornton and Baxter. Other small hamlets contained within Essa include Utopia, Ivy and Colwell. Essa also includes Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Borden.

The township is responsible for multiple functions and service including, but not limited to fire protection, road maintenance and parks and recreation management. Essa's Official Plan (OP) (2001) contains the broad policy framework to guide growth and development in the township. The township's OP should correspond with the overarching land use planning principals of the County of Simcoe and the Province of Ontario.



## **Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park**

Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park focuses on community development through the conservation and preservation of the local natural and cultural resources within the Township of Essa and Hamlet of Utopia. Friends involves both the nearby communities within the Township of Essa as well as serves as an activity hub, including Simcoe County, Barrie, Greater Toronto Area and Georgian Bay communities. Active since 1992 and operated by volunteers, Friends was incorporated in September 2006 as a non-profit organization.

The first five year lease of the 20 ha western portion of the Utopia Conservation Area was granted to Friends by the NVCA in 2007 with subsequent options for renewal. The organization has been responsible for the raising of over \$750,000, most recently investing approximately \$300,000 into the structural stabilization of Bell's Gristmill and various external improvements to the building.

Based out of the nearby Utopia Hall, the Friends have raised these funds through an extensive array of initiatives ranging from concerts and dinners, bake sales to sales of compost, as well as through donations and grants from the Township of Essa, the County of Simcoe, NVCA, the Province of Ontario, the Government of Canada, and private organizations and individuals.



Image 1 - Utopia Conservation Area - Bell's Gristmill pre-2015-2017 renovations

## 1.0 Background Information and Context

### 1.1 Purpose of the Plan

This Master Plan has been prepared to assess the conservation values, recreational opportunities and infrastructure needs of the Utopia Conservation Area. This document provides baseline information on the property and recommends a stewardship and monitoring program that will ensure the long-term viability of the site and associated features.

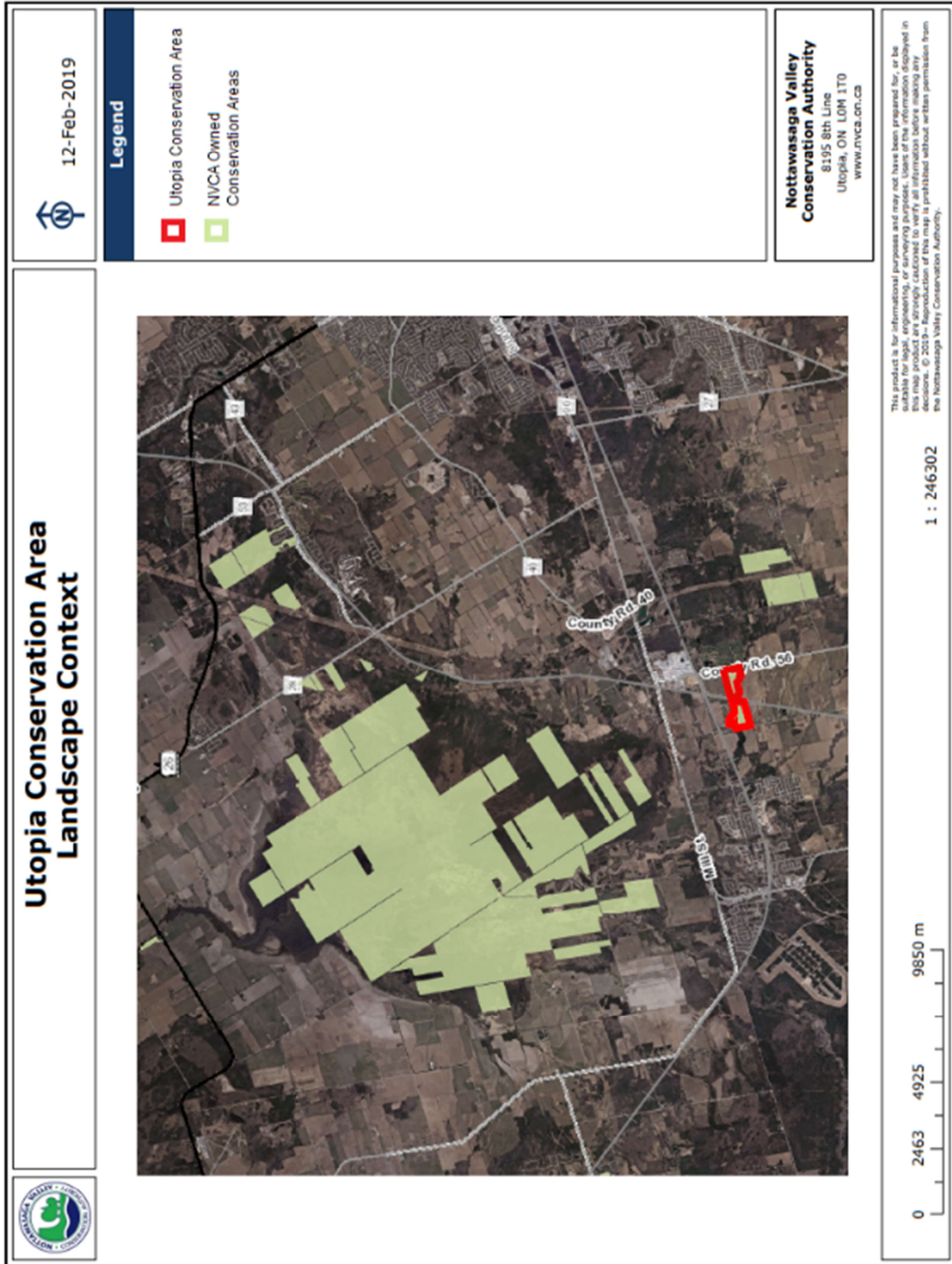
### 1.2 Location and Legal Description of Property

The 40.9 ha (102.2 acre) Utopia Conservation Area is located in Utopia, Simcoe County (see map 1). The irregular shaped property is surrounded by private property on all sides. Table 1.1 provides a summary of key property location and legal information.

**Table 1.1 Locations and Legal Information**

Area (hectares/ acre)	40.9 ha (102.2 ac)
Address	8609 County Road 56; 8613 6 <sup>th</sup> Line (Historic lot)
Lot and Concession	Part lot 30, Concession 6 and Part lot 29; Concession 6
Roll Number	Main property 4321010008-08600; Historic residential lot 4321011008-08500
Municipality/Town/City	Utopia, Township of Essa
County/Region	Simcoe County
Nearest Major Centre	~2 km east of Angus and ~12 km west of Barrie
Access Directions	From Barrie, Dunlop Street/County Road 90 west towards Angus, south onto 6 <sup>th</sup> Concession. The main entrance to the property is ~2 km south on the 6 <sup>th</sup> Concession
Conservation Authority	Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority
Watershed	Nottawasaga Watershed 2ED
Ecodistrict	Barrie 6E-6
Road Frontages	Approximately 800m total (350 m on 6 <sup>th</sup> Concession; 430 m on County Road 56)
NAD	NAD83
UTM Zone	17
UTM Centroid	593 047 E 4908554 N
Elevation	200-210 m

**Map 1. Utopia Conservation Area – Landscape Context**



### **1.3 Property History and Acquisition Background**

The community of Utopia was settled in the 1840s and was located near Bear Creek. The settlers, like many in the area, worked farms (crop and livestock) and in forestry.

The reliable water source provided from Bear Creek encouraged the construction of a gristmill and sawmill. These mills enabled Utopia to become a locally important rural centre.

The first gristmill in Utopia was built in 1864 by James Spink, at the present-day location beside Bear Creek. A sawmill was also constructed downstream. At the time when both mills were in operation, it was necessary to run the gristmill at night and the sawmill during the day because of insufficient water to operate both simultaneously. In 1876, Richard Bell was hired to work in the mill. In 1879, Richard and his two brothers, John and Manuel, took over the operation of the mill.

The mill produced feed and flour from local fields which was distributed to the surrounding towns under various brand names including Gold Coin (for bread), Snowflake (for pastry), Paracon xxx, and Bell's Best. The mill also made grain products such as shorts (fine food for pigs), bran, and grits. Processed grain from the western Prairie Provinces was shipped to Utopia by train, then brought by horse and wagon from the grain shed at the CNR siding (just north of the mill) and then often shipped back west.

The present-day gristmill (Bell's Gristmill) was built with the help of the community following a 1903 fire. The gristmill was re-opened on January 1, 1904 and continued operating until 1965.

Based on historical accounts, this new 3 storey mill was built with a solid foundation of stone which is 4 ½ feet thick, and because of quicksand, the new foundation had to be sunk very deeply. It is said that the foundation is 30 feet deep. The stones for the foundation were brought in by horse-drawn wagons and the cement was mixed by hand. The timbers were horse-drawn from a forest 8 kilometres away then hand hewn and "framed" by Dave MacFarlane.

Richard Bell's son, Harold, after serving overseas in World War I, went into partnership with his father. Harold carried on the mill after his father's death and, with the help of Gilbert McMaster, the mill continued to operate as one of the most important businesses in the community. In the late 1930s or early 1940s, the Bell Mill quit milling flour, providing only gristmill services of chopping and mixing grain. Mr. McMaster worked there for approximately 30 years, remembering when there would be twenty-five teams of horses and wagons lined up at the mill with grain to be chopped.

With advances in technology and ever-greater mass production, the survival of small mills such as Utopia's became more at risk.



Hurricane Hazel changed the operation of the Bell's Mill. On October 14, 1954, the hurricane's intensity caused the creek to rise. The water swept away the front porch of the mill and was several feet deep on the first floor, flowing down the basement stairs and out the other side. The quality and the strength of the building is attested to by the fact that it sustained little damage and remains standing today. The hurricane washed the dam away causing water to immediately recede from the mill. To rebuild the dam would have been too expensive so Mr. Bell had a diesel engine installed to power the mill.

In 1965 the mill closed, having served the community for a century. Harold Bell donated this gristmill, along with the adjacent small general store, to the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority. By the end of 1968, the NVCA acquired surrounding lands, totalling 40.9 hectares (102.2 acres), from various owners for flood management and to be used as a recreational area. In 1969, the new dam, with a fish ladder incorporated into it, was complete.

In the ensuing years, the western portion of the Utopia Conservation Area had a significant influx of recreational activity, including hiking, picnicking, swimming, camping and fishing. The portion east of the rail line remained inaccessible to the public.

Infrastructure to support day-use and overnight camping was constructed throughout the property, including a 45 metre swimming beach with change rooms, a small play area for children, 1,220 metres of fishing shoreline along with a fishing platform and the 8 hectare reservoir which was annually stocked with trout. An annual fish migration was facilitated by the means of the fish ladder at the dam. There was a wooden dock at the reservoir just near the gristmill for canoeists.

In the main conservation area, a pavilion provided a picnic shelter, picnic tables, a barbeque pit and pedestal barbeques were available for the visitors to use.

Included amongst the other features of the site were: a gatehouse, a trail and footbridge across the reservoir, designated campsites, a firewood yard, underground sewage dump station for trailers, a number of privies (outhouses), a road network and parking area, water taps, pumphouse and a garage along with a two-storey dwelling which was used as the home for a groundskeeper and his family. The house was subsequently demolished in the early 2000s.

Due to the competition from surrounding areas offering similar, if not better, amenities, the Utopia Conservation Area was used mostly by local residents. Its use declined considerably over time.

The reservoir's water quality diminished with increased sedimentation, triggering algae blooms and high turbidity. Water quality monitoring resulted in periodic beach closures which then also became a deterrent to ongoing use. Spring and summer flooding in publicly accessible areas also hampered recreational use and development. Eventually camping was discontinued, associated support amenities/facilities were no longer maintained.

In 1992, consideration to privatize the property resulted in objections from the community. In 1998, the NVCA Board of Directors adopted a resolution “to initiate the process for either leasing, selling and/or partnering to maintain and manage the Utopia Conservation Area with the local municipality, Essa Township.” The gristmill, reflective of deterioration, was scheduled for demolition.

Essa Township assumed the lease on the property and through the support and fundraising efforts of the community, the gristmill was saved from demolition and designated as a heritage property. By 2005, restoration of the building began but encountered various issues that stopped further work and the property’s lease with the Township.

In 2007, the restoration efforts were taken up directly by the community through their newly-established non-profit corporation, Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park. Following further fundraising, the gristmill underwent extensive structural stabilization (which resulted in tearing down the general store building) and restoration of the mill’s external features. Significant deterioration resulted in the demolition of the pavilion, privies, the garage and gatehouse. The pavilion and garage were constructed on concrete foundations which are still in place.

After being closed for several months during recent construction, the conservation area continues to be open to the public with events such as Spring Clean-Ups, the Canada Day Barbeque and Concert as well as the mid-summer Gristmill Run fundraiser being organized by the Friends.

#### **1.4 The Utopia Conservation Area**

The Utopia Conservation Area (see map 2) is part of a large valley system that extends from the western boundary of the City of Barrie to the Nottawasaga River and into Minesing Wetlands to the north. The Bear Creek valley is a prominent feature of the property and the surrounding landscape. The property provides wildlife corridors and linkages to significant woodlands and wetlands in the region, including the Bear Creek Provincially Significant Wetland and the Minesing Swamp Complex Provincially Significant Wetland (Minesing Wetlands and Base Borden).

Historically, the upland portion of the property has been in agricultural production leaving the valley land and ravine mainly forested. Restoration efforts in the 1980s-1990s led to coniferous plantation plantings in the eastern portion of the property and ‘in-fill’ planting of native and non-native species, including Siberian Elm, Black Locust, Scot’s Pine, Black Alder, White Ash, American Elm.

In 2015, the water levels in the reservoir were lowered for the maintenance of the rail line. The drawdown of the water levels has led to the development of a wetland along Bear Creek which has led to an increase of shallow wetland plants including broad-leaved cattail and Common Reed.

## 1.5 Planning Context

The Official Plan of the Township of Essa (2001) identifies the part of the property around the mill as being "Commercial Recreation" as well as "Open Space".

The Official Plan of the Township of Essa also specifically references the 'Utopia Mill' as follows:

### *"15.3.3 Utopia Mill*

*Located in part of Lot 29, Concession 6, the former Utopia Mill has been designated as a heritage site with the ultimate goal to restore the mill. Notwithstanding anything else contained within the Plan, the former mill may be used as a banquet hall and restaurant. Associated with this facility, outdoor recreational uses, tourist and gift shop merchandise and camp sites may also be permitted. The development of this site shall be subject to an amendment to the Zoning By-law and Site Plan Control."*

The Commercial Recreation designation identifies lands that include 'existing campgrounds which are intended to provide overnight recreational accommodation'. Pers. comment from Colleen Healey (2019) noted the intention of the zoning is for privately owned properties that have potential to create revenue through recreational opportunities.

The 'Open Space' designation identifies lands which 'are intended to be used for recreation and community purposes such as municipal parks, conservation lands, and forestry management' (Township of Essa, 2001).

The County of Simcoe Official Plan (2016) identified the area as being "Rural" and "Greenlands". The 'Rural' designation has been broken down into three categories, the first to enable the agricultural industry to function effectively in prime agricultural areas, the second to provide non-prime agricultural areas for rural uses such as recreation, the third to encourage the restoration of natural heritage areas.

The 'Greenlands' designation is to "ensure that the scale, form and location of development are such that the features and functions of the natural heritage system are sustained for future generations".

The Simcoe County Interactive Mapping further unofficially identifies the property as "Forested/Woodlands" and "Unevaluated Wetland".

The mature forests through the property have been identified by the County of Simcoe as "Forested Area/Woodlands" and as an "MNR Unevaluated Wetland" along Bear Creek.

The western portion of the Utopia Conservation Area has a small portion of the property identified as a "Highly Vulnerable Aquifer". This identifies area that "is susceptible to contamination due to the proximity to the surface or from the type of materials found surrounding the aquifer" (County of Simcoe, n.d.).

**Map 2. Utopia Conservation Area Property Boundary**



## **2.0 ECOLOGICAL FEATURES**

### **2.1 Earth Sciences**

#### ***2.1.1 Geology and Physiographic Region***

The Utopia Conservation area is part of the Simcoe Lowlands (Chapman and Putnam, 1984), a region that is highly influenced by the receding of the glaciers and glacial lakes. The sandy deposits found throughout the property are residual from the bottom of Lake Algonquin, the ancient lake that covered much of the region.

The bedrock within the conservation area is part of the Trenton-Black River Limestone series (Chapman and Putnam, 1984). The bedrock does not have a substantial influence on the conservation area because of the depth and type of soil (see following section).

#### ***2.1.2 Soils***

The Soil Survey of Simcoe County (Hoffman & Wicklund, 1962) identifies the soils of the Utopia Conservation Area as being part of three types of soil, all of which are very similar in structure and composition. The most prominent soil type is the Tioga Series followed by the Alliston Series and Percy Series. Each of these soil types is a combination of silt, sand and loam. All three of these soil types are identified as having 'good' drainage, stone free to moderately stoney and suitable for agriculture.

The Soil Class (Canada Land Inventory) (County of Simcoe, n.d.) has been identified as CL 1-3, which identifies lands that are suitable for agricultural production. Class 1 identifies soils that have no significant limitations in use for crops. Class 2 identifies soils that have moderate limitations that restrict the range of crops or require moderate conservation practices. Class 3 soils identifies soils that have moderately severe limitations that restrict the range of crops or require special conservation practices.

The history of the Utopia Conservation Area and the construction of the dam has required significant soil analysis to ensure the structural integrity of the dam during the pre-construction phase in 1966. The NVCA contracted Ainley and Associates to conduct a preliminary site investigation in 1965 (Ainley and Associates, 1965). The study analyzed the contents of two boreholes to a maximum depth of 15 meters. One borehole was located in 'natural soil' near the historic dam site, while the other was located at the top of the embankment and consists of 'artificial material' (gravel, etc.) that was used to construct the dam.

The natural soil underlying the dam site is loose, dark brown organic silty sand (buried logs) to a depth of approximately 6.5 meters. Below the organic material was compact to dense grey fine sand to a depth of approximately 12 meters. The



last layer to be assessed is compacted, grey, sandy silt to a depth of approximately 15 meters.

The description of the soil is consistent with verbal history of the site by locals stating that the foundation of the mill was 30 feet because of the unstable soil conditions.

## **2.2 Life Sciences**

### ***2.3 Landscape Ecology & Conservation Context***

Utopia Conservation Area is part of the Eastern Great Lakes Lowlands Forest region. This region represents a narrow band stretching from the central shores of Lake Huron in Ontario, across the north shore of Lake Ontario and along the Saint Lawrence River corridor into Quebec and northern New York State.

Utopia Conservation Area falls within Ecodistrict 6E-6, approximately half of the region is in natural cover; the remaining is agriculture and residential and associated development. This region is part of the transition zone between southern Ontario and the Canadian Shield to the north. This is reflected in the variety of physiographic conditions of the area, including limestone plain, shallow till and bare bedrock in the northern portion of the Ecodistrict and sand plain and till plain in the south.

Approximately 97% of all lands in this Site District are in private ownership (Henson and Brodribb, 2005). Those in public ownership are primarily Conservation Authority lands and within Awenda Provincial Park. Approximately 8% of the Site District is conserved as Conservation Authority lands (0.8%) or by provincial policy through ANSI (2.68%) and provincially significant wetland (3.54%) designations (Henson and Brodribb, 2005). The Minesing Wetland is the largest protected area within the Site District.

Although the Utopia Conservation Area's size is not significant on its own, it does provide ecological linkages and corridors to other, larger tracts of land, increasing the ecological value of the property. The Utopia Conservation Area is located approximately 1.5 km south of Minesing Wetlands Conservation Area - a Ramsar designated, provincially significant area - and one of the largest, intact wetlands in southern Ontario.

Bear Creek, which transects the conservation area, provides a forested valley which links to privately owned woodlands and NVCA's Tiffin Conservation Area to the east and Canadian Forces Base Borden to the west. The Base and privately owned lands are not specifically maintained for ecological services, however these lands still provide this function within the landscape at this time.

## **2.4 Vegetation Communities**

The Utopia Conservation Area is characterized largely by its long history of cultural influences, including mixed commercial, agricultural, and recreational land uses, all of which have contributed to the present-day vegetation patterns. The property is traversed by a north-south rail line which effectively divides the conservation area into two halves: the 'western half' and the 'eastern half'.

The eastern portion contains an abundance of mixed coniferous plantation forests, including a variety of native and exotic species such as White Pine, Red Pine, Scots Pine, Norway Spruce, White Spruce, and European Larch. These plantation forests are generally situated within areas of flatter topography and contain mature, densely planted rows of the aforementioned coniferous species.

Diversity within these communities is limited to the slight changes in planting composition and age. In general, these forests are devoid of native regeneration or herbaceous groundcover and, as such, the ecological value associated with these communities is minimal and the site would benefit from a selective harvest to allow light penetration to the understory and natural species regeneration.

A hydro corridor traverses these plantations forming a linear gap in the forest canopy located 75-100m west of County Rd. 56. This open strip is characterized by maintained cultural meadow, with groundcover comprised of Canada Goldenrod, Wild Carrot, Common Milkweed, and coniferous seedlings introduced from adjacent plantations.

The eastern half of the Utopia Conservation Area experiences some diversity along two valley systems which convey Bear Creek and a smaller tributary westward across the property. These watercourses have cut deep ravines through the surrounding sand plain which has provided some degree of shelter from historic clearing.

In at least one location within the eastern half, the valley walls host a mature hardwood forest community, containing Sugar Maple, White Ash, American Basswood, and American Beech, with Alternate-leaved Dogwood and young Eastern White Cedars in the lower strata. Further south along the main branch of Bear Creek, the south-facing valley wall hosts a thick forest of second-growth White Cedar. The north-facing wall is similarly dominated by Eastern White Cedar, although a minority mix of hardwoods is present in varying abundance.

At the base of the valley, Bear Creek's channel is broad and supports a riparian marsh community with dense pockets of Broad-leaved Cattail, Common Reed, and mixed riparian shrubs, such as American Elderberry, Red-osier Dogwood, and mixed willows.

The western half of the conservation area supports many similar communities as the eastern half. For example, the Bear Creek channel and its associated riparian marsh continues downstream across most of the western half of the property,

ending abruptly at the location of the old grist mill and dam. This riparian community is effectively a product of this now-retired dam, as the formerly-flooded sections of the channel are now exposed and fully vegetated. Downstream of the dam, the valley slopes are covered in Eastern White Cedar with the occasional inclusion of sparse hardwood growth. These forests are dense and shady, with no regenerate or understory present.

North of the Bear Creek channel, a gently-sloping valley is host to a cultural mix of young thicket communities and mature cultural woodland. Common woody species in this location include White Cedar, Red Cedar, Black Locust, Staghorn Sumac, Manitoba Maple, and Multi-flora Rose. Areas of open groundcover are similarly cultural in nature, with Grey Goldenrod, Smooth Brome grass, and Orchard Grass being common.

South of the channel is a steep north-facing valley wall that is host to a mature native forest community. This sheltered strip of forest contains a mixed canopy of Sugar Maple, White Ash, Eastern Hop-hornbeam, Black Cherry, American Basswood, American Beech, Eastern Hemlock, and White Cedar. The latter two coniferous species are more prominent along the sheltered lower half of the slope, while Black Cherry, Basswood, and Eastern Hop-hornbeam are most frequent along the exposed top of slope.

South from the Bear Creek valley, the property transitions into a cultural complex of mixed woodland, thickets, and meadows. This section of the property has been planted several times in the past, and includes mature groupings and scattered individual White Pine, Red Pine, Norway Spruce, Freeman Maple, hybrid Poplars, and Ash sp. Scattered pockets of White Birch, Black Alder, Staghorn Sumac, and Trembling Aspen occur throughout this area in varying densities. Shrub cover is generally sparse and dominated by an exotic mix of Common Buckthorn, Tatarian Honeysuckle, Multi-flora Rosa, Siberian Elm, and Manitoba Maple. Groundcover in these locations, and particularly in open locations, includes typical cultural meadow species, such as Canada Goldenrod, Common Milkweed, and Common Red Raspberry. Scattered pockets of Red-osier Dogwood and Sensitive Fern indicate the presence of poorly-drained depressions throughout the site.

Within this community, in the west-central portion of the property, several Butternut (Endangered) were noted amongst the sparse woodland edges. At least two mature trees are present, along with several saplings, many of which appeared to be in reasonable health.

## **2.5 Vascular Plants and Floristics**

Detailed vascular plant surveys have not been conducted for the Utopia Conservation Area. The cultural influences on all parts of the property has resulted in the prevalence of non-native and invasive species through much of the property, to the exception of the small deciduous forest communities along the streamside ravines.

## **2.6 Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat**

Detailed wildlife studies have not been conducted for the property; incidental observations have been recorded. The habitat communities throughout the property can be used to extrapolate the species that may be present based on habitat requirements.

Bear Creek and associated wetland would likely sustain snapping turtles (Special Concern), Midland painted turtles (SC) as well as an array of amphibians likely including spring peepers, bullfrog, green frog. The upland portion of the property would provide suitable habitat for gartersnake and milksnake.

The diversity of vegetation communities provides suitable habitat for a variety of avian species. A number of avian species would be expected based on the current habitat conditions including great blue heron, American bittern, wood ducks, song sparrow, black-billed cuckoo and American kestrel. The site appears to have suitable habitat for whip-poor-will (threatened) which require deciduous or mixed forests next to open clearings, which is abundant within the western portion of the property.

The mill has hosted turkey vultures in the past and may also provide habitat for chimney swifts (threatened) and barn swallows (threatened).

The density of the coniferous plantations on the eastern portion of the property would support avian species such as pine warblers, red breasted nuthatches, golden-crowned kinglets, and pine siskin.

The large, undisturbed condition of the eastern portion of the property provides suitable habitat for a variety of species and had evidence of heavy deer browsing throughout the property. Coyote tracks were noted throughout both portions of the property.

Otter tracks and evidence of beaver browse were observed on the western portion of the property, but are likely present on the eastern portion as well. The abundance of mature and declining trees along the stream-side ravine may provide suitable habitat for Little Brown (Endangered) and Big Brown Myotis (bats).

## **2.7 Aquatic Biology**

Detailed aquatic studies have not been conducted on the property and include only incidental observations of the condition of Bear Creek. Bear Creek transects the property and flows from east to west towards the Nottawasaga River and into Georgian Bay. This cold-water stream is groundwater fed from headwater tributaries near Barrie and along its length. By the time Bear Creek enters the property, the water has already increased in temperature and nutrient loading from the adjacent residential and agricultural activities.

Once Bear Creek flows into the stagnant head pond behind the Utopia Dam, the water warms, decreasing its viability as a cold-water fishery and altering the species composition to those fish that can tolerate higher water temperatures.

Historically, the dam supported a 'fish ladder' which allowed passage of fish up and downstream. The fish ladder was decommissioned prior to 2000 to restrict the migration of the introduced rainbow trout and avoid competition with native brook trout which utilize Bear Creek upstream from the Utopia Dam.

Historically, the reservoir behind the dam was stocked with up to 2,000 rainbow and brook trout. Increased sedimentation in the reservoir may have eventually reduced the habitat suitability for trout above the dam by the time stocking was ceased in the early 1990s.

Detailed aquatic surveys would likely find warm water species such as creek chub and white suckers directly upstream of the dam where the water tends to pond as well as brook trout, black nose dace and pearl dace further upstream. Downstream from the dam rainbow trout and Chinook salmon are present as well as a small residual population of brook trout.

A review of historic satellite imagery (County of Simcoe, n.d.), shows significant water pooling in some regions of the property, particularly along the 6<sup>th</sup> Concession, south of Bear Creek and in near the southern border of the property. This may indicate a prevalence of ephemeral ponds, suitable amphibian habitat in early spring.

The 1966 site assessment (Ainley and Associates, 1966) notes the possibility of artesian wells near Bear Creek, west of the CPR rail line though the exact location is not clearly identified.

### **3.0 Social Context**

#### **3.1 Existing Site Features**

The main entrance to Utopia CA is at the 6<sup>th</sup> Line with a secondary service entrance at Old Mill Road. Large locked gates limit the general public's access to the conservation area by foot only.

An unmarked trail system exists and is composed of two parts, a primary and secondary trail system. The primary trail system is accessible by service vehicles and links the two main entrances to the property (Concession 6, past the mill and dam to Old Mill Road). It is approximately 520 meters in length (see map 3).

The secondary trail system follows the former camp paths and provides pedestrian access to the rest of the property. The southern portion of the secondary trail loops around the southern border of the property and north, parallel to the creek, while the northern section of trail ends at what used to be a pedestrian walkway across Bear Creek (see map 3). This narrow, grassy trail is maintained by the Friends and is approximately 1,500 meters.



There is a series of unmaintained trails throughout the property which may have originally been wildlife corridors or access paths to historic infrastructure or features. These trails follow ridges and natural pathways through the property and may provide opportunities for trail expansion in the future.

Less than 1 km from the property is an abandoned CN rail line which may provide opportunities for linkages to Angus and Collingwood.

On the south side of Bear Creek is the Utopia dam and the gristmill. The present mill, known locally as Bell's Gristmill, is the 1903/1904 version, having replaced the original mill after a fire. Three stories in height, the building is completely clad in vintage steel shingles. Recent restoration efforts have included structural stabilization of the building, rebuilding the veranda and the installation of plexiglass windows, recreated to resemble the originals.

These renovations have secured the integrity of the building, while significantly improving its external aesthetics and security of the building. Some of the original mill equipment remains within the building. The building is not accessible to the public, reflective of ongoing maintenance requirements and renovations.

The Utopia dam is 8 metres in height, concrete with a chain link fence restricting access. The waterfall at the dam directs water into the lower section of Bear Creek. The creek varies in width from approximately 5 metres near the dam and narrows to approximately 3 meters or less downstream.

The creek flows under the Concession 6 bridge, the western limit of the conservation area. A modest road side parking spot nearby on Concession 6 was developed by the Township of Essa to provide parking and access for anglers.

**Map 3. Utopia Conservation Area – Trail Network**



### **3.2 Adjacent Land Uses**

Part of the north boundary of the property abuts large residential lots and a municipal park while the remaining north boundary and two other sides (south and west) abut agricultural fields. Other than an 18 hole golf course directly east of County Road 56, the property is nestled into a mainly agricultural setting interspersed with large residential lots.

### **3.3 Legal Arrangements**

There are two renewing leases associated with the Utopia Conservation Area. The first is the previously discussed 5-year lease agreement with the Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park. The lease is in its third period of renewal which runs from 2017 to 2022.

The second lease is for the eastern portion of the property and is with Quality Sod Farms to access Bear Creek for sod/crop irrigation. The lease is annually renewing.

There is a high capacity hydro corridor that transects the eastern portion of the property. There are no leases for the use of this portion of the property, however HydroOne requires access for maintenance and line clearing.

The rail line that transects the property is owned by CPR and is not part of the property.

### **3.4 Demographics and Market Analysis**

The 2016 population of County of Simcoe was just over 305,000 and is poised to grow to over 479,000 by 2041 (Hemson Consulting Ltd., 2008).

The Township of Essa's population was just over 18,000 in the same year and is also projected to grow significantly to an estimated 24,800 by 2031 (Dillon Consulting Ltd et al 2016). The Township of Essa has a higher proportion of the '20-29' demographic compared to the County of Simcoe and the Province of Ontario (County of Simcoe, 2019). This is also commonly a physically active demographic, often looking for outdoor recreation opportunities that may be provided at the Utopia Conservation Area.

Because of the close proximity of the Utopia Conservation Area to the City of Barrie, populations changes in this city may influence the users of the area as well. The current population of the City of Barrie is currently over 141,000 and is projected to grow to an estimated 243,803 by 2031 (Dillon Consulting Ltd et al. 2016).

The hamlet of Utopia has seen localized growth with the addition of a multi-unit subdivision. These new residents will undoubtedly make use of the recreational opportunities provided at the conservation area.

## **4.0 Management Recommendations**

### **Vision for the Future with Supportive New and/or Improved Features**

Through a process of public consultation and committee discussion, a vision and associated supporting features were developed for the Utopia Conservation Area (Appendix 3) with five main priorities identified for future management efforts of the Utopia Conservation Area.

The five priorities for the Utopia Conservation Area are as follows:

1. Conserve, protect and learn about the natural features of the property
2. Increase visitors to the property within the context of conservation
3. Maintain the flood control structures
4. Restoration of the Mill
5. General administration

#### **1. Conserve, protect and learn about the natural features of the property**

The master planning process identified a number of gaps in basic natural heritage knowledge about the property. No recent biological inventories have been conducted; the most recent was a very general assessment for the previous 1980 master plan. As an organization that strives to make informed, science-based decision making, a thorough knowledge of the natural heritage features of the property is an integral first step.

A brief off-season walk of the site noted the presence of a number of Butternut trees as well as suitable potential habitat for a variety of species at risk, including Whip-poor-will and Barn Swallows. Identifying habitat for species at risk is an integral first step prior to the development of trails or infrastructure. A formal Ecological Land Classification analysis and in-season field investigations will facilitate the development of priority conservation zones and should take place prior to any significant development.

The property would benefit from an overall restoration/planting plan to guide future activities and focus efforts. The restoration plan would provide locations for planting as well as species and estimated costs and volunteer requirement which would facilitate fundraising efforts.

A number of invasive species were identified on the property, many of which were intentionally introduced through tree planting. Invasive species management is an excellent opportunity for volunteer engagement as it provides relatively easy, on-the-ground work opportunities for those interested in becoming involved with the management of the property.

A thorough investigation of the invasive species on the property and approach for management should be undertaken. Some species noted on the property are highly

invasive (black alder, Manitoba maple, European buckthorn) but may have little overall negative impact on the ecological integrity of the property. Removal of these woody invasives, however, may increase the viability of the site for species such as whip-poor-will and native pollinators.

Common reed was noted in the Bear Creek wetland and is currently in low enough density that it could easily be managed. The water control structure may also facilitate eradication as cutting the stems then increasing water levels is a recognized management solution.

## **2. Increase visitors to the property within the context of conservation**

Community engagement and interest has been an integral part of the restoration of the Bell's Gristmill. In order to ensure community engagement continues into the future, the public should be able to have access to the property to foster an appreciation of the property and its naturalized and cultural features. Increasing visitor access to the property through infrastructure development ensures continued engagement by the public.

### **Recreational Trails**

There is already a formal and informal trail network in place on the property. The 520 meter primary trail requires annual maintenance for tree clearing; the limestone surface is suitable to meet accessibility requirements.

The secondary trail system is regularly mowed and is not deemed accessible. To improve the accessibility of the site, the ~1,500 meter trail would have to have the organic material removed and resurfaced with limestone screenings at the cost of approximately \$50/meter. Because of the significant cost of the resurfacing of the trail, a phased-in, multi-year approach would be required.

Creating a loop trail, linking the northern and southern portions of the property across Bear Creek, would increase the recreational value of the trail system. No costing has been developed for this project as the cost would vary based on the design requirements. The linkage would span approximately 100 meters and would be a combination of trail, boardwalk and an elevated bridge.

Trail connections to nearby regional trails should be investigated to further increase the recreational opportunities of the property. Nearby trails include the Ganaraska Trail and TransCanada Trail. Future linkages may include the Clearview Collingwood Rail Trail which makes use of decommissioned rail lines to link communities.

Additional recreational infrastructure includes interpretive signage, including introductory signage, parking, pavilions and washrooms.

### **Trail Infrastructure**

Community members requested benches and picnic tables to be added to the site. These items can be used as in memoriam or recognition features.



## **Interpretive Signage**

Using the template from other NVCA properties, the introductory signage template can be developed and constructed in-house for a cost of approximately \$1,000. The optimal location would be in the vicinity of the 6<sup>th</sup> Concession access and would include content covering the history of the site, map, parking fee and partnerships.

## **Parking**

To limit unlawful access to the site, it is recommended that the parking area be fenced off to restrict vehicle access. Parking should accommodate the average number of vehicles expected to regularly use the property and need not be constructed to facilitate large once-a-year events as overflow parking can also be accommodated along the primary trail. The parking area would then be included in NVCA's standard remote payment system.

The parking lot should accommodate approximately 15 vehicles or approximately 100m<sup>2</sup>. This size was determined based on the recommendation of an addition of extra space to accommodate 2-way traffic when parking lots accommodate more than 15 vehicles.

## **Pavilions and Washrooms**

As use of the property increases, additional features such as picnic pavilions and washrooms would provide a better user experience, increase the length of stay of visitors, and provide additional revenue options (rental of pavilion/space). Since the site has no operational septic on site, the washrooms would have to be vault-style washrooms (e.g. outhouse). The cost per two seat unit ranges from \$15,000 to \$60,000 depending on labour costs and design. The installation of a multi-unit, septic serviced washroom may range from \$100,000 to \$150,000 as it would require drilling a well, installing a septic, design and permit costs and construction.

Pavilions also range in cost, based on the size and location. Old foundations on the site may be used for the pavilion which reduces the cost of the structure. Smaller pavilions would range in cost from \$15,000 to \$20,000 while the larger timber frame construction pavilion may range between \$20,000-\$100,000.

## **Wetland Lookout Points and Viewing Blinds**

As the number of visitors increase, lookout points and viewing blinds are an excellent way to guide and direct traffic. They also provide a 'goal' for visiting hikers and provide the opportunity to rest at a focal point on the property. The lookout points and viewing blinds would be strategically located adjacent to the trail network for optimal viewing of the natural features of the property. The estimated construction cost for the viewing blinds is \$5,000, while lookouts are approximately \$10,000, depending on the design.

## **Utopia Commons**

In addition to the gristmill restoration (below), Friends have a vision of using the area around the mill as a gathering space, or “commons” area using the mill as a backdrop for events and festivities such as music and nature festivals, Canada Day celebrations, weddings and corporate functions.

Site planning, including floodplain setbacks, is required to layout the details of the space. Features may include washrooms, a stage and seating as well as connections to the trail system and recreational infrastructure (i.e. lookout points and viewing blinds).

All infrastructure development must be pre-approved by the NVCA.

### **3. Maintain the flood control structures**

NVCA is required to maintain the flood control structures at the site to ensure protection of property and people downstream. The dam is currently in good condition but annual monitoring and maintenance is required to ensure continued structural integrity of the dam.

NVCA will monitor beneficial incidental uses of the dam infrastructure, such as controlling water levels for invasive species or ecosystem restoration (fisheries habitat).

### **4. Restoration of the Mill**

Bell’s Gristmill is a locally significant heritage feature, recognized within the community and formally by the Township of Essa. Friends have committed significant resources to the renovation and maintenance of the mill. The mill will provide a backdrop for events that will take place at the conservation area, with the long-term vision of opening up the first floor to the public once accessibility requirements have been met.

The mill was on the verge of demolition. Community efforts have seen the restoration and stabilization of the foundation and are developing plans for the rest of the building.

Significant work is still required to maintain the building and to allow public access to the site. Phase one – stabilizing the foundation of the mill has been successfully completed.

The remaining restoration plan will include:

- Develop architectural plans to ensure structural integrity and use of the building;
- Inventory equipment still in the mill; document and restore for public education (including interpretive panels);
- Restore the external of the building, including replacing missing roof and wall shingles;

- Restore the interior of the building (floors, walls and ceilings);
- Meet accessibility requirements for the first floor, explore accessibility requirements for basement and second/third floors; and
- Investigate refurbishing the waterwheel for educational and aesthetic purposes.

## **5. General administration**

The partnership between the Friends of Utopia Gristmill and Park and the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority has saved the mill from demolition and the park from privatization. Moving forward, this partnership will require continued communications and revision of the lease agreement as appropriate for the management of the site.

The restoration of the mill and the development of the recreational infrastructure of the site will require significant financial resources in the short and long-term. Generating revenue has been a constant focus of Friends to permit the property to be maintained, improved and remain naturalized to-date. Incorporating features within the property that will enhance the recreational opportunities of the greenspace remains an integral component to ensuring its long-term maintenance and management while also supporting the property to remain publicly accessible and naturalized in the future.

## Utopia Master Plan

Five priorities for the Utopia Conservation Area

1. Conserve, protect and learn about the natural features of the property
2. Increase visitors to the property within the context of conservation
3. Maintain the flood control structures
4. Restoration of the Mill
5. General administration

Action 1 - Conserve, Protect, Learn	Strategy	Delivery
<b>A - Inventory</b>		
1.A. 1 Complete ecological inventory (flora/fauna/SAR)	Develop better understanding of the functions of the property	NVCA
1.A. 2 Complete ecological land classification for the property	Guide the identification of 1.A.3	NVCA
1.A. 3 Conduct stream survey (including OBBN, morphology, fish sampling)	To identify trends in stream condition and changes	NVCA
1.A. 4 Review and implement MFTIP as required	Selective harvesting will allow for the release of understory species to foster natural regeneration	NVCA
1.A. 4 Identify priority conservation zones	Be able to guide the development of a trail plan (Action 2)	NVCA/Friends
<b>B- Invasive Species</b>		
1.B. 1 Inventory invasive species	Develop better understanding of the presence and impact of invasive species on the property	NVCA/Friends/Volunteers
1. B. 2 Develop plan for invasive species control	For priority invasive species	NVCA/Friends
1.B. 3 Monitor invasive species	If priority invasive species are identified ongoing monitoring of IS	Friends/Volunteers
1.B. 4 Control Invasive Species	NVCA-led with volunteer assistance	NVCA/Friends/Volunteers

<b>C- Restoration Plan</b>		
1.C. 1 Develop a restoration plan to increase biodiversity through plantings, other	Investigate strategies to increase/improve biodiversity	NVCA/Friends/ Essa
1.C. 2 Secure funds for vegetation planting (trees, shrubs, herbaceous) and restoration (removal of non-native trees/shrubs)	Focus planting on native species, followed by 'community engagement species' (i.e. pollinators, food trees, etc.)	All partners
1. C. 3 Recruit volunteers and implement planting program	Implement restoration plan through volunteer planting opportunities; Foster community support through engagement	Friends/Essa/ NVCA

<b>Action 2 - Increase visitors to the property, and visitor experience</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Delivery</b>
<b>A- Trail Development</b>		
2.A. 1 Inventory current trail network	Identify current trail location, condition and requirements	Friends, NVCA
2.A. 2 Develop a trail plan, prioritizing trail development, sensitive areas and needs	Strategically prioritize trail development based on current use, need and resources	Friends, NVCA, Essa
2.A. 3 Secure funds for the implementation of the trail plan	Identify funding sources (municipal, regional, other) and engage community	Friends, NVCA, Essa
2.A. 4 Develop 1,500 meters of trail to be lower maintenance and accessible	For entire property, for duration of the plan, including main and secondary trails	Friends, Essa, NVCA
<b>B- Signage</b>		
2.B. 1 Develop the main entrance to the property	Using other NVCA properties as a template, create an engaging entrance at the main entrance	Friends & NVCA
2. B. 2 Secure funds for the signage and infrastructure needs	Investigate funding opportunities for signage	Friends & NVCA
2. B. 3 Develop property introduction signage	To be consistent with NVCA's "blue swoop" template	Friends & NVCA
2. B. 4 Develop interpretive panel series	Focusing on property highlights (cultural history, watershed)	Friends & NVCA

<b>C- Visitor Management and Parking</b>		
2.C. 1 Develop visitor management infrastructure plan for NVCA approval and fundraising	Review user needs and priorities	Friends & NVCA
2.C. 2 Creating a parking lot for the main entrance	Includes installation of a remote parking payment system	Friends, NVCA, Essa
2.C. 3 Fencing off parking lot	To better manage access to the conservation area	Friends, NVCA, Essa
2.C. 4 Develop entrance pavilion/gate house/other	Review regional examples of entrance infrastructure	Friends, NVCA, contractor
2.C. 5 Utopia Commons	Investigate requirements and feasibility for Utopia Commons	Friends, Community
<b>D- Conservation Area Infrastructure</b>		
2.D. 1 Develop infrastructure plan	Engage community and user groups	Friends, NVCA, Essa
2.D. 2 Secure funds for the implementation of the infrastructure plan	Investigate opportunities for infrastructure	Friends, NVCA
2.D. 3 Prioritize the construction of pavilion(s), washrooms, lookout points	Based on user needs	Friends, NVCA
2.D. 4 Benches and picnic tables	Bench: \$375 Picnic table: \$375 Accessible picnic table: \$450	Friends, NVCA

<b>Action 3 - Maintain the flood control structures and safety of the property</b>		
	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Delivery</b>
<b>A - Dam Safety</b>		
3.A. 1 Monthly/annually inspect dam	Ensure safety of water control structure	NVCA
3.A. 2 Remove vegetation around the dam	Ensure longevity of the water control structure	NVCA
3.A. 3 Conduct repairs as required around the dam	As required to ensure safety	NVCA
<b>B- Property Safety</b>		
3.B. 1 Regularly monitor property/mill for trespassers, vandals and damage to the property	Develop long-term strategy to ensure security of the building	Friends, NVCA, Volunteers

3.B. 2 Proactively manage risks and hazards on the property (hazard trees, access to buildings, etc.)	Annual monitoring by NVCA staff, regular reports to be submitted to NVCA by Friends	Friends, NVCA, Volunteers
3.B. 3 Ensure the operation of the dry-hydrant	Inspections as required, review on insurance requirements; may require moving the hydrant	Friends
<b>C- Property Clean-Up</b>		
3.C. 1 Ensure area around the mill is safely maintained	Reduce visitor hazard	Friends, NVCA
3.C. 2 Remove all infrastructure associated with previous uses	Includes thorough site inspection for debris and hazards	Friends, NVCA, Essa

<b>Action 4 - Restoration of the Mill</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Delivery</b>
<b>A- Ensure safety and security of the mill</b>		
4.A. 1 Continue to engage community in mill restoration	Through various community events and community engagement	Friends
4.A. 2 Work with security company and local police to secure the mill from vandals	Address changing needs/requirements	Friends
<b>B- Identification of mill assets</b>		
4.B. 1 Inventory historic assets still in the mill	Reach out to community experts including local historians and museum staff	Friends, Volunteers
4.B. 2 Identify/secure funding sources for restoration of equipment	Identify funding opportunities focused on cultural history	Friends, Community partners
4.B. 3 Identify uses for equipment (educational programming, archive/museum)	Investigate opportunities with the NVCA education program, other community organizations	Friends, Community partners
4.B. 4 Restore and document equipment and material from the mill	With the intention of using restored assets for education within the mill	Friends, Community partners, volunteers
<b>C- Exterior Renovations</b>		
4.C. 1 Secure funds for further exterior renovations	Investigate funding opportunities (significant resources required)	Friends, Community



4.C. 2 Restore external siding to historically accurate condition	Sourcing/recreating historic material	Friends, Contractor
4.C. 3 Restore roof to historically accurate condition	Contractor securement and work to follow NVCA policies (WSIB, Working at Heights, Insurance, etc.)	Friends, Contractor
4.C. 4 Restore eaves trough to historically accurate condition	Sourcing/recreating historic material	Friends, Contractors
4.C. 5 All major renovations will require NVCA plan approval		Friends & NVCA
<b>D- Interior Renovations</b>		
4.D. 1 Develop plan (engineered) for restoration plan of the interior, including identification of accessibility requirements	Significant restoration requires engaging professional engineers for the building process	Friends with NVCA approval
4.D. 2 Secure funding to implement plan	Significant funding required	Friends
4.D. 3 Implement interior renovation plan	Multi-year, significant engagement required	Friends and contractor

<b>Action 5 – General Administration</b>	<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Delivery</b>
<b>A – Review Lease</b>		
5.A. 1 Annual review of the lease agreement, prepare for any changes in the 5 year update	Proactively identify and address issues and concerns	NVCA/Friends
<b>B- Operational Fundraising</b>		
5.B. 1 Investigate opportunities for fundraising, particularly using the assets of the property	Opportunities may include: pay for parking, event fees, recreational opportunities, event bookings in addition to grants and sponsorships	Friends, NVCA, Essa

Action	Estimated Cost (Lead)	Timeline
<b>Action 1 - Conserve, Protect, Learn</b>		
A - Inventory	8 staff days @ \$500/day (NVCA)*	1
A – MFTIP implementation	2 staff days @ \$500/day	2
B - Invasive Species – Inventory	1 staff day @ \$550 (NVCA)	1
B- Invasive Species – Report	2 staff days @\$550/day (NVCA)	1
B- Invasive Species - Annual Monitoring	1 day/year (Friends/Vol)	Ongoing annually
B- Invasive Species - Control	Varies (Friends)	As required
C- Restoration Plan – Develop Plan	4 staff days @ \$550/day (NVCA)	1
C- Restoration Plan – Fund securement	Est. \$10,000 (Friends)	1
C- Restoration Plan - Planting	Varies (Friends)	1
<b>Action 2 - Increase visitors to the property, and visitor experience</b>		
A- Trail Development	~1,500m @ \$50/m	1, 2, 3
B- Signage	~\$5,000 for materials, (includes: main welcome ~\$1,000 and interpretive series); 4 staff days @ \$500/day (NVCA content & map dev and review) 2 staff days @ \$500/day (NVCA sign installation) ~10 volunteer days @ \$120/day (content dev)(Friends lead)	1
C- Visitor Management and Parking	Project size required individualized line items	1, 2
• C.1 Develop visitor management plan infrastructure	3 days @ \$120/day (Friends)	
• C. 2 Creating a parking lot for the main entrance	~\$10,000	1
• C. 3 Fencing off parking lot	~\$6,000	1
• C. 4 Develop entrance pavilion/gate house/other	\$20,000-\$100,000	1-2
• C. 5 Utopia Commons	\$50,000 - \$150,000	2-3
D- Conservation Area Infrastructure	~\$100,000 (Footbridge); ~\$60,000 (Washroom); ~\$70,000 (Pavilion) ~\$30,000 (Mini-Pavilion)	2, 3
• Footbridge over Creek to establish full trail loop		
• Washroom, Pavilion, Mini-Pavilion		
<b>Action 3 - Maintain the flood control structures and safety of the property</b>		
A- Dam Safety	1 NVCA staff day/year @ \$500	Ongoing
B- Property Safety	4 NVCA staff days/year @ \$500	Ongoing

	10 volunteer days@\$120/day	
<b>Action 4 - Restoration of the Mill</b>		
A- Ensure safety and security of the mill	Est. 5 vol days/year @ \$120/day	1, 2, 3
B- Identification of mill assets	5 volunteer days @ \$120/day	1, 2
C- Exterior Renovations	\$20,000; waterwheel \$50,000	1, 2
D- Interior Renovations	Baseline restoration (non-operational): \$100,000 - \$200,000; Accessibility: \$100,000 - \$200,000	2, 3
<b>Action 5 - General Administration</b>		
A- Review Lease	Average of 1 NVCA staff day/year @ \$500/day 1 volunteer day/year @\$120/day	Ongoing
B- Operational Fundraising	Varies	Ongoing

\* Unless otherwise noted, NVCA staff time will be valued as 'in-kind'.

**'Timeline' is broken down in the following time intervals**

- 1      Years 1-5**
- 2      Years 5-10**
- 3      10 plus years**

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[www.utopia.on.ca](http://www.utopia.on.ca)

## Appendix 1 – Pictures of the Site



Image 1 - Historic Photo of Mill



Image 2 - Historic Picture of the Mill and Dam



Image 3 - Bell's Gristmill



Image 4 - New Veranda and Volunteers





Image 5 - Overgrown Campground in Western Portion



Image 6 – Winter Mill Photo





Image 7 - Spring Mill Photo



Image 8 - Bear Creek, Wetland and Dam





Image 9 - Utopia Dam



Image 10 - Utopia Dam





Image 11 - Bear Creek and Wetland



Image 12 - Dense Coniferous Plantation on East Portion



## Appendix 2 – Community Open House for the Vision of the Utopia Conservation Area

***Please join us for a COMMUNITY OPEN HOUSE about***  
**The Vision for the UTOPIA CONSERVATION AREA**  
**Saturday February 2 • Sunday February 3**  
**10am – 1pm**  
**Utopia Hall (8396 6<sup>th</sup> Line, Utopia)**

In recent months, the *Friends of the Utopia Mill & Park*, with the supportive input of the Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Area and Essa Township, have been working on the development of a Master Plan for the Utopia Conservation Area to help guide its direction in the years to come.

The development of this Master Plan for the Utopia Conservation Area occurs at an important milestone for the parkland, reflective of the achievements that have been realized through years of devoted care and investment by the *FRIENDS OF THE UTOPIA MILL & PARK (Friends)*, the community stewards and lessors of the property, and the supportive oversight by the *NOTTAWASAGA VALLEY CONSERVATION AREA (NVCA)*, the property owners and conservation stewards.

Working together, the organizations have been able to retain the parkland as publicly accessible, naturalized greenspace. And contained within this property, the unique Bell's Gristmill, the 155-year old heritage building, has incurred significant investment, having undergone extensive structural stabilization and aesthetic exterior renovations (known as Phase I of the gristmill's restoration).

With the Gristmill's Phase I now completed, *Friends* realizes the opportunity to review the full property from the perspective of its current and future potential to conserve and enhance the naturalized parkland for ongoing enjoyment and usage within the vision of environmental and conservation stewardship.

***The natural tranquility and beauty of the Utopia Conservation Area cannot be understated. The naturalized greenspace and wetlands, the abundant biodiversity, the inspiring heritage gristmill and its story across generations within the community --- all set in a place called UTOPIA – form the present-day elements and realities for which the vision and future direction of the Utopia Conservation Area is based. Preserving, protecting and enhancing these elements is fundamental, offering exciting complementary recreational opportunities which are becoming evermore in demand.***

**PLEASE JOIN US DURING THIS OPEN HOUSE**  
**LEARN ABOUT THE VISION • PROVIDE YOUR INPUT**  
**WE WELCOME YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please contact Susan Antler, chair, *Friends of the Utopia Mill & Park*  
@ 1-877-499-4255 or [susan@utopia.ca](mailto:susan@utopia.ca).



*Article published on January 31, 2019 in the Alliston Herald*

**Master plan will provide final vision for Utopia Gristmill and Park**

Group has fundraised thousands of dollars for restoration effort

News Jan 31, 2019 by [Brad Pritchard](#) Alliston Herald

So much has been done over the past three decades to preserve the history and natural features of the Utopia Gristmill and Park, but the work is just getting started.

The Friends of the Utopia Mill and Park are getting closer to putting the final touches on the master plan for the 50-acre green space tucked away in the small rural community between Angus and Barrie.

The non-profit group of volunteers is working on the plan in partnership with the Nottawasga Valley Conservation Authority (NVCA), which owns the property, along with Essa Township and the County of Simcoe.

The group's spokesperson Susan Antler said work on the plan began this past summer after they secured an economic development grant from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs worth about \$15,000.

Antler said the group matched these funds as well.

The attention has shifted to the master plan following the completion of the first phase of restoration work on the historic Bell's Gristmill.

Through a combination of fundraising and grants, the group managed to cobble together enough money to hire a restoration specialist to repair the structural problems that were jeopardizing the building that looks over Bear Creek, on the south side of the Utopia Dam.

The mill was first constructed in 1864, but was rebuilt in 1903 after it was destroyed in a fire.

Antler said the restoration cost about \$300,000, but overall the group has raised \$750,000 for the park.

"The building was just holding on, so it has an incredible will to live," she said.

### **Appendix 3 – Comments/Feedback from Public Open House**

Thank you for all your efforts. We are looking forward to walking trails. But I find however it is used, a washroom is paramount. Thank you for asking our opinions.

~~~~~

Love the ideas you have shared today. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Your vision/dedication is amazing. I have a few fundraising ideas I have shared with Susan. I am available to help in any way you think I would be best suited. Thanks again. Warmest Regards.

~~~~~

I really like the idea of preserving the gristmill. I feel opportunities where people can come and stay for weddings, parties, community gatherings, etc. is a great concept. Having more of a modern approach by adding a new build, where the mill can act as a backdrop. Would love to stay in touch and be more part of the process. Thank you for the opportunity to present my interior design project.

~~~~~

I think that all the ideas for the Grist Mill and area are good. Walking trails and possibly a venue for music great idea. Nothing around like this. Great job to all involved.

~~~~~

Congratulations for all your work so far. I admire your stamina and perseverance with this project. Love the idea of a series of trails. I have hiked on the Bruce Trail, the trails on Manitoulin Island, California State, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.

\*suggest a system of blazes such as the Bruce Trail uses. Retaining this parcel of land as greenspace in the midst of overwhelming development and encroachment of subdivision.

~~~~~

As always, you have our support. Godspeed. Would love to see a walking Labyrinth; place for sacred ceremonies/gratitude/medicine teachings. Spirit Nature gratitude. Ceremonies for youth. Vision quests. I am a trained healer. Thank you.

Would love to see the fish ladder open.

~~~~~



Some really great ideas and we look forward to seeing the outcome.

- Place for photos for weddings?
- Café for snacks?
- Ice cream bar

Would love to see a connected conservation area including Tiffin, The Grist Mill, etc. to preserve our precious wildlife. Some suggestions:

- Add the Grist Mill clean-up to student volunteer curriculum
- Organize a big clean-up day
- Fall Harvest Silent Auction.

Good Luck!!

~~~~~

I fully support the vision for the Utopia Conservation Area as proposed by the Friends of the Utopia Mill & Park. The restoration of the gristmill, the naturalized greenlands and wetlands are critical to preserve the heritage of Utopia for future generations. If you don't value the past – you will have no future!

~~~~~

Proud of you ... and everything with plans!

~~~~~

1. An area of the mill to be a museum with artifacts from Simcoe County and a craft shop with works from local artists
2. Clean up the pond area to make it usable for swimming if feasible
3. Consider repairing the old equipment to again make it into a working mill as a tourist attraction. Has been done at Denison's Mill Quebec

~~~~~

Restoring Grist Mill only seems natural to me. Utopia is a beautiful area, full of rich history and a strong community and I feel that giving people a place/setting to enjoy the wildlife and wilderness while not disturbing it would be a continued ideal way to build on this "Utopia". Working the trails, adding washrooms and parking are all good additions to enjoy this gorgeous area.

~~~~~

I would love to see the Gristmill area include proper trails to enjoy and protect environment!

~~~~~

The plan looks great! I love that a bridge to cross the creek is on the plan to make a loop.

~~~~~

I love the ideas you have; developing a circular trail with walkway over the creek, celebrating the wetland and natural features, the parking, washrooms & pavilion as necessary features to fully utilize the greenspace. Partnerships in the community may help in obtaining these goals, support from the NVCA in the way of staffing, considering programs such as Mood Walks (Mental Health), school engagement through curriculum support for environment.

Conservation areas are not only vitally important in preserving the natural world around us, they are also vital to people – so they may be and stay connected with Nature and realize its importance to our well being. The Gristmill will provide an added attraction to bring people to our community both for the nature and the historical significance of Utopia.

~~~~~

I'm impressed with all the work that has been done. If the work on completing the loop could be completed, I think that would bring out more people to attend trail then visit mill.

~~~~~

- Linkage to other trail systems
- Campground
- Focus on trails
- Natural area
- Butterfly/Pollinator garden – Mono Mills part

~~~~~

Awesome presentation (& soups of course). I love it that we have the opportunity to share with the whole community the wonderful world of Nature. ... the Bridge to complete the loop to walking in paradise – sounds like a most marvelous idea. The occasional event to keep the momentum of people coming to enjoy the space (ie) Canada Day ... maybe "Earth Day" .... I would like to see concerts & celebratory events to remain at the hall. Enhancement of wild gardens & trellises to grow things on & colour would be invigorating to all.

~~~~~

In my opinion, most of the Manitoba Maple Trees be cut down and give space for other trees to be planted and grow, or the Manitoba Maples will take over the whole area and won't look inviting to walk.

The pond should be cleaned out and put new sand on the bottom. The north side of the pond (Old Mill Road) could be a dog park and a place for the dogs to swim while the south side could be used for swimming and swimming lessons.

Wild flowers could be planted - Bring it back to Nature. Bird houses and feeding stations.

Keep the trees (nature) and small animals will make as home as they are getting pushed out of the homes with subdivisions.

It will be great when the Grist Mill opens.

~~~~~

Walking trails around the perimeter as well as cross country skiing in winter with accessibility for handicapped as well

~~~~~

It would be nice to have bike trails added as well.

~~~~~

I think that you guys are doing an excellent job. If there is any comment I would say that if it is possible to have some of its historical artifacts on display (if not possible Photographs and explanation of how the mill worked. I also am looking forward to the bike trails.

~~~~~

It is very important that this land be protected for its natural beauty and cultural heritage. We are taking down trees everywhere and the watershed is under ever-greater pressure. When do we stop? We need clean air to breathe, clean water to drink and use and land to be there for the animals, birds and other critters as well as our own peace.

I agree with this vision. We must take great care of this precious space for nature, ourselves and the future.

~~~~~

**Vision of Utopia Conservation Area  
Community Open House @ Utopia Hall  
Saturday February 2 & Sunday February 3, 2019**

## **Appendix 4 – Vision for the Future of the Utopia Conservation Area**

### **Elements for Inclusion** ***As Identified and Described at Community Open House***

#### **a. Re-establish and Improve Existing Trails**

A walk or hike through Utopia Conservation Area West has much to offer a visitor. Improving the trails and their accessibility, ensuring that they are safe and travel-pleasurable, is essential.

The Primary Trails need to be better delineated and re-surfaced with limestone screenings to allow the main trail to be accessible while also reducing long-term maintenance costs.

Upon review of the use of the Primary Trails, linkages with the secondary trails and their enhancements will be developed.

As well, rather than viewed in isolation, the Trails being established need to be mindful of the opportunities for linkages to the current and future biodiversity, pedestrian and bicycle trail systems being undertaken by Essa Township and Simcoe County.

#### **b. Washrooms**

Presently there are no washrooms on-site nor any publicly-accessible washrooms nearby the Utopia Conservation Area.

While this might not be in high demand by the local residents who currently walk the parkland, temporary amenities have had to be rented by Friends for community gatherings.

As Utopia Conservation Area West becomes more frequented by the public, washrooms are essential.

Two locations for these amenities are considered : (1) near the main entrance by the 6<sup>th</sup> Line where visitors will enter and exist from the parkland and (2) near the Gristmill where community events will be featured longer-term.

### **c. Main Entrance Features**

The 6<sup>th</sup> Line is the main entrance to the Utopia Conservation Area West. It needs to be reconstituted to more visibly welcome visitors to the site. It should be developed in an environmentally sustainable way (eg. use of renewable, sustainable materials wherever possible, solar panels), reflective of our overarching vision and opportunities to reinforce our environmental stance and messages.

The entrance may include:

- In & Out lanes for vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians;
- Major entrance feature to identify the Utopia Conservation Area West;
- Park entrance booth;
- Interpretation boards (Bear Creek/NVCA watershed, heritage including Bell's Gristmill, amenities, naturalized areas, trail system); and
- Parking.

### **d. Parking**

Beyond the nearby residential community within the Hamlet of Utopia, the majority of conservation area visitors will come by car. A parking lot to accommodate vehicles will need to be developed, incorporating as well an area to lock-up bicycles.

### **e. Welcome Pavilion**

A formal gathering area near the entrance can accommodate a variety of experiences, from initial orientation to the site to organized events and activities, helping as well as a shelter in the event of inclement weather during a visit.

Specific construction details will need to be developed incorporating sustainable building practices and materials. Accessory elements such as benches and tables will need to be provided.

Materials required for the servicing of this and other functions within the parkland can be stored in a needed Facility Shed, to be constructed nearby.

### **f. Interpretation Boards (Nature, Gristmill, Trails, Dam)**

Interpretation Boards need to be appropriately set up to heighten the visitor experience. "Edutainment" signage that not only explains the attractions and rules of the conservation area but also can help inspire environmental as well as community action and care will be of great value.

### **g. Mini Pavilions**

Mini pavilions complete with picnic tables can help host visitor gatherings within a naturalized setting, close to the trails.

### **h. Establish Lookout Points Over Bear Creek and Wetland**

The wetland and Bear Creek are ideal settings to experience the sights and sounds of the Utopia Conservation Area West. The geography of the site is conducive to lookout points, directing visitors to highlighted areas where nature abounds.

### **Bird Blinds**

Utopia Conservation Area is very abundant in the number and species of waterfowl and songbirds.

While the current settings are conducive to their observation without great disturbance, this nature experience can become quite popular with the number of visitors having the potential to reduce the presence of birdlife.

As activity is monitored, the potential for bird blinds and other viewing areas may become desirable to set up a physical barrier to minimize disturbance while also allowing for viewing enjoyment.

### **i. Bell's Gristmill**

Bell's Gristmill serves as a major focal point for the Utopia Conservation Area West. Its' service and life within the community for over 150 years is a source for education, inspiration and entertainment.

Much has already been invested to ensure the longevity of the Gristmill into the future. Its' picture-postcard beauty has been improved substantially with the many external aesthetic improvements done in recent years.

Practically, much more needs to be invested to enable the gristmill's interior to be viewed. Add to this the fundamental requirements for accessibility and the costs to actually restore the gristmill to a functioning mill become prohibitive in present-day reality.

In the short term, the gristmill will be maintained and enhanced as a back-drop setting for activities, protected from vandals and wildlife while also ensuring visitor safety. Lighting around the windows and the framing of the overall building could help increase the magic of the site as experienced in other properties such as the Parliament Buildings in Victoria, BC.

A plan to work on the internal clean-up and safety of Bell's Gristmill is a priority. Included in the plan should be:

- The remaining mill equipment (eg. shutes) should be identified, if required, restored, installed (if not in situ) and appropriately documented as well as interpreted in panels;
- The exterior envelope of the building (eg. roof and wall shingles, eavestroughs) need to be further restored as well as the veranda roof shingled;
- The interior floors, walls and ceilings should to be restored;
- Accessibility, at least on the main floor, is a must. Also, accessibility to the basement and upper two floors should be explored for accessibility.
- Architectural drawings plans prepared as to how to turn, in the first phase, the main floor into a publicly-accessible viewing and potentially, function space should be done;
- A copy replacement of the original waterwheel should be considered for installation as an evocative image and completion of the building's exterior.

#### **j. The Utopia Commons**

Recognizing the significant hurdles, costs and limitations of the space within the Gristmill to make it function, the available space beside and in the area between the Gristmill and the wetlands forms a high potential, visually stunning, setting for a community gathering area. The UTOPIA COMMONS could both serve the day-to-day needs of visitors as well as being an event space for celebratory occasions (eg. music and nature festivals, Canada Day celebrations, weddings, corporate functions). Once the interior of the mill becomes more accessible, it will add an additional element of the UTOPIA COMMONS.

More specific planning, recognizing floodplain dynamics and other factors, is required to layout the details of this potential event space and ongoing management. Elements such as washrooms, a stage and seating area as well as connections for the viewing of the wetlands would need to be considered in the plan.

#### **k. Construct a Bridge over Bear Creek (parallel to the railway) to Establish a Loop-Trail**

The bridge that used to cross Bear Creek to the east of the railway line deteriorated many decades ago and has since disappeared. It served as a way to "loop" the trails in the parkland, enhancing the visitor's experience.

Building an environmental sustainable, safe and accessible bridge again will link the currently established trails which are on both sides of Bear Creek and the wetlands, making the whole hiking and "walking the trail" more satisfying in its length and experience.



