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COMMENTS ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL COMMISSION'S GATINEAU PARK SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORTATION DRAFT PLAN

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The Ottawa Valley Chapter of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS-OV) is pleased to have this opportunity to provide comments to the NCC as it finalizes its Gatineau Park Sustainable Transportation Plan.

We strongly support the development of this plan. The transportation problems in Gatineau Park are well known; excessive motor vehicle traffic and clogged parking lots are significant irritants to park users and damage the park's ecosystems. As the population of Ottawa-Gatineau continues to increase dramatically, we fear visitation will also continue to increase from its current high levels. A sustainable transportation plan is long overdue.

CPAWS-OV outlined our concerns with transportation to and within Gatineau Park and identified a host of possible solutions at an earlier stage of the plan's development. A copy of our letter to Marie Boulet, Director of Gatineau Park and the Greenbelt, dated 14 January 2010, is attached. We are disappointed with the slow pace of progress.

Vision and Guiding Principles

We strongly support the vision of "access and travel to and within Gatineau Park will be less reliant on the automobile in favour of efficient modes of transportation that have less of an impact on natural ecosystems..." However, the 2035 timeline is much too distant! The issues need to be addressed today and actions implemented in the next 2-5 years. Much can be accomplished in a very short period of time if there is the will to do so.

The top-two guiding principles must be "*reducing* peak traffic conditions" and "*reducing* ecological impacts," not "*managing* peak traffic conditions" and "*managing* ecological impacts."

No new roads – period – should be built in Gatineau Park.

Traffic and Parking Issues

Excessive motor vehicle traffic in the park and lack of sufficient parking is a significant irritant to many park users – not only to the motorists themselves, but also to cyclists,

pedestrians and park users in general. As noted, different areas of the park are major concerns at different times of the year; these are well known. Impacts on park users include safety risks, noise, reduced wildlife sightings, and a general loss of enjoyment. Environmental impacts include degraded air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, wildlife fatalities, and habitat fragmentation.

The solution is not more/wider roads or more/larger parking lots.

CPAWS-OV believes that a multi-pronged approach is necessary to address traffic and parking issues:

1) Shuttle buses

Several opportunities to employ shuttle buses within Gatineau Park are mentioned. This is an excellent idea that we fully support. A fleet of small shuttle buses operating during peak periods – for example, on weekends during ski season, mid-summer, and Fall Rhapsody – from key parking lots could do much to reduce traffic volumes and parking lot overcrowding. The buses should service key destinations in the core of the park, including the parkways loop, Champlain Lookout, McKenzie King Estate, Meech Lake beaches, and the downhill ski area at Camp Fortune. The buses should provide universal access.

The NCC could partner with a local company or organization to cover the program costs through corporate sponsorship.

A shuttle bus to Meech Lake beaches in the summer must not be rejected on the premise that “heavy vehicles are prohibited” on Meech Lake Road beyond P11. The NCC should work with the Municipality of Chelsea to remove this restriction – which apparently does not apply to the trucks employed in building palatial new homes in the park along this road. Shuttle buses have been successfully adopted in many other protected areas around the world, many with more challenging roads than Meech Lake Road. However, the section of roadway between the two ends of the parkway “north loop” could be resurfaced to improve safety and comfort.

2) Public transit

As noted, very few park users reach Gatineau Park by public transit. This of course is not surprising; public transit service to the park is poor, and the few services that do exist are not well known. We strongly agree that new services should be developed and existing services should be improved and better publicized.

Integration of OC Transpo’s Ottawa public transit services with STO’s Gatineau services (what a concept!) could go a long way toward increasing the number of people who use public transit to reach Gatineau Park. The NCC should pursue this goal.

3) New fee structure

Gatineau Park's access and user fee regime should be structured to encourage park visitors to use sustainable transportation methods to reach the park. Park user fees for individuals should be abolished in favour of motor vehicle parking fees. These fees would apply year-round; an annual pass would be available. Pay-and-display facilities would be provided at unsupervised lots.

Such a change to the fee structure would encourage visitors to access the park on foot, by bicycle, or by public transit, or to car-pool.

4) Less through traffic

A large percentage of motor vehicle traffic through Gatineau Park is commuter traffic. Empirical evidence suggests that such traffic trends to be faster than park user traffic. This directly impacts park users and wildlife.

We congratulate the NCC on its decision to close the 500 m section of Boul. Gamelin from the Gatineau Parkway to Promenade des Fées to motor vehicles. This road is currently a major source of through traffic, especially during morning and evening rush hours. Closing the road will reduce habitat fragmentation. It will mitigate slightly the huge fragmentation wrought by the recent construction of the four-lane Boul. des Allumiettières across the park.

The parkway system should be closed to motor vehicle traffic during the morning and evening rush hour periods to prevent their use for commuting.

Measures to reduce the attractiveness of Notch Road and Eardley-Masham Road to commuters should be investigated.

5) Fewer user conflicts

Conflicts between cyclists and motor vehicles occur mainly as a result of high traffic volumes and high speeds.

To reduce such conflicts, the most important first step is to reduce the number of motor vehicles in the park. Actions to reduce motor vehicle traffic in the park have been discussed above.

The parkways should be closed to motor vehicle traffic for a longer period of time on Sundays – until at least 1 pm – to encourage their use for sustainable modes of transport. This would still allow plenty of time for sites and activities to be accessed by motor vehicles from the parkways.

The second step is to reduce motor vehicle speeds. Speed limits should be enforced. An enhanced “share the road” awareness campaign should be launched to remind motorists that the parkways are designed for low speeds and must be shared with cyclists. Large “sharrows” (such as used on the Véloroute des Bleuets in Lac-Saint-Jean) should be painted periodically on the roadways.

We believe that the width of the parkways pavement is more than adequate for user safety. The grassy shoulders should not be paved, nor should the roadways be widened. Wider roads result in higher traffic speeds, greater habitat fragmentation, and reduced safety!

Higher speeds endanger not only pedestrians and cyclists, but also wildlife. We suspect that a major cause of turtle mortality on Eardley-Masham Road is the increased speed of traffic as a direct result of the recent “improvements” to the roadbed.

6) Pedestrian and bicycle links to the park

We fully support visitors accessing Gatineau Park on foot or by bicycle wherever possible. However, it is not clear that all of the proposed or suggested additional pedestrian/bicycle links are desirable or even needed. Pathways fragment ecosystems (albeit much less than roads do). Possible future links should be studied and evaluated prior to implementation.

Where pathways meet major roads, landscaping opportunities that create a sense of separation from traffic and improve safety should be considered.

7) Promote the regional offer

Gatineau Park is too small and under too much pressure to accommodate more users. The NCC should partner with local municipalities and area organizations to promote the many wonderful and varied natural areas beyond Gatineau Park, including the Greenbelt, Parc national de Plaisance, and Forêt La Blanche.

Concluding Remarks

We look forward to working with the NCC in finalizing its Sustainable Transportation Plan. We remain available to meet with you to provide further information or clarifications with respect to our comments. Please feel free to contact us at (613) 232-7297 or by email (jmcdonnell@cpaws.org) to arrange a meeting.