Niagara Escarpment Commission
Business Plan 2014-2017
Introduction

The Niagara Escarpment

Ontario’s Niagara Escarpment rises wild and beautiful above the farmlands and communities of south-central Ontario. It is one of Canada’s most magnificent landforms – an iconic forested ridge traveling 725 km from Queenston, near Niagara Falls, to Tobermory, at the tip of the Bruce Peninsula. Legislation to conserve this feature, the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act (NEPDA), was passed in 1973.

The Escarpment and lands in its vicinity are protected by the Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP). The NEP Area covers portions of 22 local municipalities within seven regions and counties and the City of Hamilton.

Land use activity on the Escarpment is guided and shaped by the NEP. In 1985 the Ontario government adopted this visionary environmental plan after 12 years of preparation, hearings and review. The NEP aims to conserve Ontario’s Niagara Escarpment as a substantially continuous natural environment as set out in the NEP and the NEPDA. Development on the Escarpment must be compatible with this long-term vision.

The NEP outlines land use designations, development criteria and related permitted uses, including farming, forestry and mineral resource extraction. It also provides the framework for a string of more than 145 existing and proposed parks and open spaces linked by the Bruce Trail.

The Escarpment is a source of water for a vast area of south-central Ontario. For several municipalities, it is also the last remaining band of continuous forest cover, wildlife and natural heritage linkage. As well, the Escarpment Plan ensures the maintenance of open countryside and scenic landscapes, conserving land for agriculture and complementary rural activities.

The NEP is the forerunner of today’s Ontario Greenbelt and forms the cornerstone of this visionary Provincial initiative. In addition, the NEP area is a UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve, giving this iconic landscape international recognition.
The Niagara Escarpment Commission

The Commission is an Ontario government agency with 17 Cabinet-appointed members from the general public and from municipal counties, regions and cities on the Escarpment. The Commission reports to the Minister of Natural Resources and is supported by a staff of 24 operating from offices in Georgetown and Thornbury.

The NEC’s responsibilities include administration of the NEP, Escarpment permits, processing amendments to the NEP, providing NEP interpretation, commenting on municipal and provincial policies, programs and land use initiatives, supporting the development and acquisition of parks and trails, undertaking environmental monitoring and promoting sound stewardship of Ontario’s Niagara Escarpment.

While the next review of the NEP is scheduled for 2015 to be coordinated with the reviews of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Greenbelt Plan, the NEC has initiated preparatory work on several key topics including land use designation criteria and mapping, land filling and contour changes, water policies, agriculture, aggregates to name a few.

1 Mandate

The NEPDA and the NEP set out the Commission’s responsibilities and regulatory mandate as a Crown agency.

To provide for the maintenance of the Niagara Escarpment and land in its vicinity substantially as a continuous natural environment, and to ensure only such development occurs as is compatible with that natural environment by:

- Protecting unique ecologic and historical areas;
- Maintaining and enhancing the quality and character of natural streams and water supplies;
- Providing adequate opportunities for outdoor recreation and public access to the Niagara Escarpment;
- Maintaining and enhancing the open landscape character of the Niagara Escarpment in so far as possible, by such means as compatible farming or forestry and by preserving the natural scenery;
- Supporting municipalities within the NEP Area in their exercise of the planning function conferred upon them by the Planning Act insofar as those functions complement the NEP; and
- Implementing an environmental and land use monitoring program.
The NEC must also prepare for and participate in the review of the NEP, next set for 2015.

2 Strategic Directions

The NEC Strategic Plan, 2012-2016 was approved by the Minister of Natural Resources on January 11, 2013. The Strategic Plan was developed by the Commissioners and staff of the NEC in consultation with the public, stakeholders, municipalities and others. The Strategic Plan guides the work of the NEC, particularly in the approach to the scheduled review of the Niagara Escarpment Plan in 2015.

The Vision

The NEC supports the Purpose and Objectives of the NEPDA and the NEP that remain unchanged and increasingly relevant in Ontario's growing urban environment.

The Purpose of the NEPDA is:

To provide for the maintenance of the Niagara Escarpment and land in its vicinity substantially as a continuous natural environment, and to ensure only such development occurs as is compatible with that natural environment.

The Vision Statement of the NEC is:

Through excellent public service, support the Purpose of the NEPDA by maintaining and enhancing the natural environment and cultural landscape of the Niagara Escarpment for today's and future generations.

Mission Statement

Preserve, Protect and Promote the Niagara Escarpment, and uphold its UNESCO World Biosphere Reserve designation.

Guiding Principles

The Niagara Escarpment Commission will be guided by the following principles in carrying out its responsibilities.

1. Preservation of the Niagara Escarpment through environmentally sustainable land use planning
2. Leadership in awareness of the value of the Niagara Escarpment
3. Consistent application of policy and legislation
4. Independent and impartial decision-making
5. Transparent, efficient and effective processes and procedures
6. Positive and respectful engagement with clients, partners, and the public
7. Organizational excellence

The Strategic Plan sets out ten strategic goals and actions to implement them:

1. Role of the Commission
2. Niagara Escarpment Plan Implementation
3. 2015 Plan Review
4. Biosphere Reserve
5. Environmental Monitoring
6. Consultation and Partnerships
7. Communications
8. Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System (NEPOSS)
9. Employee Development
10. Technology

Implementation is well underway.

3 Overview of Current and Future Programs and Activities

Operational Performance

Overview
In addition to the core functions established by the NEPDA, a Memorandum of Understanding between the NEC and the Ministry of Natural Resources sets out the current expectations of the NEC:

- Promoting the objectives of the NEP and the NEPDA through a variety of planning and communication initiatives;
- Supporting the Province's complementary Greenspace initiatives as set out in the Greenbelt Act, 2005 and the Greenbelt Plan;
- Supporting the Ministry's Natural Spaces Program, where applicable, and cooperating with the Ministry and park agencies.
- Cooperating with the Ministry, park agencies and others in the implementation of the Niagara Escarpment Parks and Open Space System (NEPOSS), land stewardship, research, and communications activities related to promoting and achieving Plan objectives.
- Sharing resources and receiving legal support as required.

Priorities and Results

The NEC's front-line role as a key provincial environmental land use planning agency aligns to the Ministry of Natural Resources' priority to:
• Promote, market and enhance the protection of natural heritage in southern Ontario.

The Commission is a statutory body that operates at "arms length" from the Provincial Government in accordance with the NEPDA. Its decisions are made openly, independently, impartially and according to a risk management framework.

As a regulatory agency, the NEC conducts itself according to the management principles of the Government of Ontario, including the principles of ethical behaviour, excellence in management, diversity and inclusion, careful and prudent administration of public funds, professional public service that is transparent, responsive, fair and respectful.

The NEC and its staff are committed to leadership in environmental awareness and sustainable land use planning.

The following are NEC's operational objectives, many of which mirror the objectives of the Ministry of Natural Resources:

• Promote healthy, sustainable ecosystems.
• Undertake sustainable planning to promote the preservation of ecologically sensitive areas and habitat for Species at Risk recognizing that Ontario's Niagara Escarpment uniquely includes three transecting ecosystems.
• Conserve biodiversity.
• Maintain the Niagara Escarpment's protected ecosystems which are home to 55 species of mammals, 325 species of birds and 40% of Ontario's rare flora.
• Conduct scientific research.
• Manage the ONE Monitoring Program that monitors the Escarpment's ecology and applies scientific findings to strengthen policies to preserve the Niagara Escarpment. The NEC has sponsored and encouraged research, environmental monitoring and the development of GIS tools to improve planning, biosphere reserve management, policy review and implementation.
• Develop effective resource management policies.
• Undertake initiatives, such as the Leading Edge Conference, provide vehicles for the sharing and integration of information concerning Niagara Escarpment Biosphere research, environmental monitoring, management techniques and stewardship.
• Promote sustainable economic opportunities in the resource and tourism sector.
• Support the Niagara Escarpment's economic benefit to Ontario. The Niagara Escarpment possesses aggregate resource areas, agricultural lands and parks, and tourism activities related to the natural features of the Escarpment.
• Work with the Bruce Trail Conservancy, local conservation authorities and conservation organizations to raise awareness and provide and enhance opportunities for Escarpment recreation and natural area protection. The NE Parks and Open Space System including the Bruce Trail and the Escarpment Recreation Area designation provide public access and recreation opportunities.
• Encourage green initiatives and technologies where compatible with the NEP.
• Ensure compliance with regulations and conduct enforcement, as necessary.

Niagara Escarpment Plan Implementation

Overview

• Continue to meet NEPDA responsibilities.
• Continue to implement the NEP and partner with municipalities on Escarpment related planning matters.
• Continue to pursue (and report on) changes in the legislation (NEPDA) and the Development Control (DC) regulations to update and streamline the NEP Amendment and Development Control processes, including revising Permit requirements to be more efficient.
• Continue the processes of removing DC outside the NEP area and align Development Control with NEP boundaries; continue to work with municipalities for the removal of DC in Urban Area, Minor Urban Centre and Escarpment Recreation Area designations, where such lands are eligible for zoning.
• Direct new development and intensification to Urban Area, Minor Urban Centre and Escarpment Recreation Area designations of the NEP.
• Contribute to protected spaces objectives by continuing NEC actions related to NEPOSS (e.g. participation in MNR-lead, strategy development and advisory membership on the NEPOSS Council).
• Meet the NEC responsibilities under the Environmental Registry and provide an electronically-accessible and searchable database for public notice and review of Development Permit Applications.
• Continue staff training initiatives and succession planning to strengthen and enhance planning, technology and management skills within the NEC.
• Undertake a risk based approach to compliance and enforcement activities and report annually on program.
Development Permit Applications & Related Activities

The NEC manages the NEP through a land use permit system that ensures through careful planning and design that development within the area of Ontario's Niagara Escarpment is compatible with the Escarpment's natural features.

In addition to considering Niagara Escarpment permit applications and administering the related land use regulations, the Commission also reviews and participates in hearings on applications for severances, subdivisions, official plans, zoning bylaws, environmental assessments, park plans, transportation corridors and undertakings by other government agencies, within and adjacent to the NEP Area. The objective is to ensure compliance with the NEP.

The Commission also assesses and comments on proposed provincial and federal legislation, regulations and policies that would have the potential to affect the Niagara Escarpment program.

Niagara Escarpment Plan Amendments / Plan Reviews

As part of the administration of the Niagara Escarpment Plan, the NEC initiates and processes applications to amend the Plan. Usually, amendments propose site-specific exceptions to the policies of the Plan. Amendments are approved, rejected or modified by the Minister of Natural Resources or the Ontario Cabinet. Occasionally, the NEC itself proposes amendments to update, improve or clarify the Plan. The next 2015 review will be coordinated with the reviews of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Greenbelt Plan. In the interim, the NEC has the responsibility to determine whether or not any Amendment constitutes an "urban use". Amendments proposing "urban uses" may not be considered until the 2015 Plan Review.

The NEP is reviewed and amended on a regular basis. Legislated reviews of the NEP were completed in 1994 and 2005. In 2005, the NEPDA was revised to coordinate the review of the NEP with the 10-year review of the Greenbelt Plan, which will commence in 2015.

Ontario's Niagara Escarpment (ONE) Monitoring Program

The ONE Monitoring Program was established by the NEC to determine whether the policies of the NEP are achieving their objectives. The Program uses environmental indicators at different spatial scales to examine the linkages between land use change and ecosystem status.

The following projects are currently being undertaken as part of the ONE Monitoring Program:
Wetlands

The NEP strives to protect wetlands through its policies and designation criteria. The ONE Monitoring Program is examining change in wetland size inside and outside the Plan Area. An historical account of wetland conditions is currently being compiled, and site specific indicators will be incorporated into that study in order to assess wetland function.

Forest Biodiversity

The ONE Monitoring Program, in partnership with the University of Waterloo, has been monitoring one hectare forest plots annually since 1996. Using Environmental Monitoring and Assessment Network (EMAN) protocols, five plots have been established along the Escarpment in relatively undisturbed forests. Data is currently being analysed to examine change over time in forest biodiversity and health.

Regionally Significant Life Science Areas of Natural & Scientific Interest (RS LS ANSIs)

Regionally Significant Life Science ANSIs, which are included in the Escarpment Protection Area designation of the NEP, are the “next best” natural areas in Ontario compared to Provincially Significant Life Science ANSIs. RS LS ANSI area loss due to development will be examined using the same methodology developed to assess change over time in Provincially Significant Life Science ANSIs.

Species at Risk

Jefferson Salamander, a provincially and nationally Threatened Species, is almost exclusively found along the Niagara Escarpment in vernal pools surrounded by forest habitat. ONE Monitoring Program staff assisted in the development of a Recovery Strategy for the species, and continues to work with the Recovery Team to implement the Strategy.

4 Resources Required

The NEC will be able to fund the majority of anticipated expenses needed to fulfill its legislated mandate at its current funding level. There are pressures as set out below.

In June 2006, Cabinet determined that OIC remuneration would be paid at SMG levels (SMG 1 for Commissioners, and SMG 2 for Chairs). This had the effect of increasing per diems by approximately 50%. The NEC’s allocation for such remuneration has, however, remained constant at the 2007 level and hence each yearly increase, if any, in SMG salary levels is reflected in a similar increase in per diems and a consequential increase in the funding shortfall will continue in future years.
The cost of litigation involving major hearings before Boards and Tribunals (e.g., Environmental Review Tribunal, Ontario Municipal Board) is difficult to plan as dates of hearings or the number of hearings cannot be planned in advance. Costs are regularly monitored with Legal Services Branch.

As well, the 2015 Review will require additional resources to conduct research, consult, analyze and develop recommendations in partnership with MNR, MMAH and other Niagara Escarpment partners and stakeholders.

5 Risk Identification, Assessment and Mitigation Strategies

See Risk Plan attached as an Appendix. One example of legal risks is: The Commission is fortunate to receive the benefit of Ministry counsel in its participation at current hearings and appeals. However, if the Ministry’s Legal Services Branch were to become unable to fulfill the Commission’s litigation requirements, the retention of private counsel to represent the Commission would exceed the funds currently available for such purposes. Since much of the litigation in which the Commission participates is initiated by other parties, the NEC’s ability to reduce its costs is constrained.

To mitigate this risk the NEC will monitor all costs, attempt to negotiate settlements where appropriate and work with MNR colleagues in managing priorities.

6 Environmental Scan

As we move forward over the next three years and beyond, external demands impacting the NEP Area will include:

A. Increased pressure from population growth and intensification in the GTA
   - Higher land values in the NEP Area
   - Increased demand for recreation, public parkland and natural landscapes
   - Increased pressure for urban uses in the NEP Area; including home businesses and cottage industries
   - Increased pressure for large home and large lot development
   - Increased demand to deposit “earth and fill” and recontour the landscape
   - Increased demand for aggregates
   - Increased demand for provincial highways / transmission lines / pipelines / infrastructure / green energy
   - Increased use of automobiles
   - Increased demand for public transportation
   - Expectation that development is environmentally sustainable and rural countryside is protected
B. Impact on agricultural land uses

- Increased demand for farmers to be more competitive
- Higher land costs and smaller farm units
- Specialization in agriculture
- Increased demand for locally grown, organic and farm-market foods
- Move towards farming as a tourism destination (e.g., pick your own and farm outlets)

C. Increased pressure for suburban and urban fringe uses to locate outside the Greenbelt and GTA influence

- Increased residential pressure (leapfrogging development) in Dufferin, Simcoe, Grey and Bruce Counties

D. Aging population demographics

- Increase in retirement-focused development, i.e. trails, waterfront and retirement villages, gated communities etc.
- Increase in recreational demands, i.e. rock climbing, skiing, parks, trails (motorized and non-motorized, nature appreciation, hunting, fishing, etc.
- Change in types and seasons of recreation / leisure use

E. Competition among recreational uses

- Mechanized and passive recreation, mountain bicycling, rock climbing and hiking, etc.

F. Increased demand for new and/or renewable energy systems, e.g., wind power, solar energy and geothermal systems

G. Increasing awareness and concern for environmental matters and public expectations of environmental stewardship and green initiatives. This can be expected to result in increased litigation (e.g., appeals, hearings, court actions etc.). In addition to Development Control and compliance activities, the workload of the NEC is increasingly complex. Development Control and Amendments require consultation with other planning jurisdictions and regulations for protection of endangered species, development of green energy, source water protection, etc.

7 Staffing

The Commission’s current complement is 24 employees – 20 in the main Georgetown office, and 4 in the satellite Thornbury office, which services the northern portion of the Commission’s jurisdiction.
Commissioner, stakeholder and customer expectations must continue to be managed regarding realistic timelines for service delivery.

Additional staffing is required to prepare for and undertake the research, consultation and analysis for the 2015 Plan Review. These resources are temporary until the outcome of the Review is realized: one additional temporary FTE at the SMG-1 level and a temporary assignment at the Senior Strategic Advisor level have been competed for and are now in place.

Finally, there continues to be a need to enhance staff development and training and succession planning. Each employee has a learning plan and staff development and assignments are addressing succession planning. The NEC has provided international intern opportunities for placements and provided staff with developmental assignments inside the NEC (Thornbury) and outside the NEC (Guelph District). In the next three years approximately 15% of the staff is eligible to retire. Using knowledge management transfer practices including mentoring and appropriate documentation will be important tools to support continuity of operations.

8 Performance Measures and Targets

The Government of Ontario has established a set of performance goals common to all Ontario agencies which are fundamental to accountability in the conduct of business and service to clients. These eight performance goals provide a value system for agencies from which performance measures, standards and quality can be established. The Commission has adopted these performance goals and considered the Province’s “open for business” direction as the basis for its business process, administrative procedures and everyday practice:

1. **Fairness**: The provision of service and performance of statutory functions in an impartial, lawful, unbiased and just manner.

2. **Accessibility**: The ability to provide information and services that are simple and easy to use.

3. **Timelines**: The performance of tasks within established time frames based on reasonable expectations.

4. **Quality and Consistency**: The production of accurate, relevant, dependable understandable and predictable information and results, with no errors in law or fact.

5. **Transparency**: The use of policies and procedures that are clear and understandable to everyone involved.
6. **Expertise:** The possession and use of the skill, knowledge and technical competence required to discharge all statutory responsibilities and maintain public confidence.

7. **Optimum Cost and Best Practice:** The provision of services at a cost that is based on best practices and is cost effective for everyone involved. It should be noted that the Commission does not charge any fees for its services.

8. **Courtesy:** The demonstration of respect to everyone who comes into contact with the agency.

These agency performance goals are consistent with the purpose and work of the NEC. Similar high standards of conduct have guided the Commission in its daily business since its inception in June 1973. NEC performance measures are derived from corporate goals for all Ontario agencies, legislation, the approved NE Plan and its implementation.

**Performance Measures**

Performance measurement provides benchmarks for evaluation of agency effectiveness, efficiency, quality of service and accountability of action. The Commission has established performance measures to help provide important information on the time it takes to process applications, how access is provided to a variety of stakeholders and to what extent agency decisions are in conformity with NEP policies. By monitoring NEC performance, the Commission can evaluate the effectiveness of policies, quality standards and/or practices in meeting its approved performance goals. All of the following measures were met in 2013-2014.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Measure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Board of Commissioners</td>
<td>Meetings are open to public and clients, and NEC members are accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff available at Commission offices</td>
<td>8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday (other times by appointment)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Georgetown</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Thornbury</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Calls will be answered by the third ring or sent to voicemail (during business hours). Calls will be returned within one business day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email and Online</td>
<td>Emails and online messages that require a response will be acknowledged within two business days and answered within 15 days. If a conclusive response is not possible, an interim response, along with an</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Measure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fax and Mail</td>
<td>Correspondence by mail and fax that requires a response will be answered within 15 business days. If a conclusive response is not possible, an interim response, along with an estimated date for a complete response, will be provided within 15 days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maps, publications and web site</td>
<td>Available and updated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning guides and application forms</td>
<td>Available and updated for customers/stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Permit Applications</td>
<td>Commission decision time will vary depending upon the complexity of the application, the response time of proponent to requests for additional information and response time for commenting agencies over which the Commission has little control. Applications will take from 8 to 12 weeks. More complex applications will take longer.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plan Amendment Applications</td>
<td>Commission action within NEPDA process requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review of municipal Official Plans, consents, zoning by-laws, etc.</td>
<td>Commission reply within due date (usually 30 – 60 days depending on complexity)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Client meetings &amp; site visits</td>
<td>Minimum of one per application</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compliance and Enforcement</td>
<td>Commission response within 48 hours</td>
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<td>Conflict of Interest (if any) by Commissioners or staff</td>
<td>Declaration to Chair or Director as required by OPS directives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commission decisions, comments</td>
<td>Conformity with NE Plan policies and recommendations</td>
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**NOTE:**

Performance measures will be monitored by the Commission and evaluated on an annual basis in conjunction with its review of strategic directions, business priorities, budget planning and performance achievement. This annual review may result in adjustment of standards, procedures or measures to meet performance goals and/or corporate directions. For example, the OPS Common Service Standards (CSS) were revised in April 2013 and those updates are reflected in the measures above.
Performance measures will also be revised from time to time to reflect any changes in government expectations for the accountability of agencies, boards and commissions. The above measures represent benchmarks for service and quality in respect to Commission corporate priorities for core program activities which are monitored on a continuing basis. Additional measures may be added from annual work plans and individual performance plans in a given year to track results of specific Commission programs and projects e.g., environmental monitoring, mapping technology, data management, policy agenda, technical reports, information materials, staff training and other Commission initiatives.

The combination of corporate and specific performance measures provide a representative broad spectrum of results from which the Commission may examine its accountability, effectiveness, efficiency and productivity.

9 Three-Year Budget

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<td>Communication</td>
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<td>Services</td>
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<td>Supplies and Equipment</td>
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<td>Summer Student Program</td>
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<td>(Recoveries)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Allocation</td>
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<td>$2,410,100</td>
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<td>(assumed identical for 3 &quot;out years&quot;)</td>
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Discussion

The above 3-year forecast is based on a number of assumptions:

- that there will be continued effort to find efficiencies;
- that salaries, wages and benefits will comply with collective agreements and OPS directives;
- that ODOE will remain relatively constant and reflect already approved constraints;
that the NEC's expenses will be managed within approved allocations;
- Commissioners' per diems, which are tied to SMG salaries (see Part 4, Resources Required) will not increase as long as SMG salaries are not increased; and
- The temporary SMG-1 will be managed as a pressure.

The NEC's ODOE allocation is composed of several categories of funds. If those monies are not spent on NEC activities, they are returned to the Ministry. Actual litigation costs vary significantly from year to year, in the last 5 years it ranged from a high of 150,000 to as low as 7,000, with an average being 53,000. Legal costs are primarily related to hearings and vary based on the number and complexity of the cases that the NEC is involved in. The NEC endeavors to mitigate this risk by focusing on highest risks to the purposes and objectives of the NEP and negotiating settlements where appropriate.

Any forecasted in year savings or pressures in ODOE or salary are discussed with MNR on a quarterly basis. In 2013-2014 savings were allocated to one-time investments including:

- Web site development;
- Addition of Commission meetings to support 2015 Plan Review
- Line-speed Improvements.

ODOE expenses include Transportation and Communication (i.e. telephones, mail and travel expenses, etc.), Services (i.e. computer equipment leases, per diems, leased office equipment, staff development & education, vehicles, Commission meetings, etc.) and Supplies and Equipment. Additional costs to improve speed and capacity for the Thornbury office computers is being managed and additional service is being implemented in Georgetown to improve productivity (though with increased costs).

10 Initiatives with Third Parties

The Commission has partnered over the years with a number of stakeholders from its community of interest, for example: The Bruce Trail Conservancy, the Coalition on the Niagara Escarpment (CONE), the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Inc., the Wine Council of Ontario, and the Ontario Sand, Stone & Gravel Association.

Re-Sampling of the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve

Initiated in 2011, this is partnership project with the NEC, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Inc., and the University of Toronto, the "Re-Sampling of the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve project aims to determine how and if vegetation communities along the Niagara Escarpment have changed since they were last surveyed in 1979 – 1981. Sites revisited were those listed in the Ecological Survey of the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve by Riley et al. 1996.
In total 149 sites were sampled over the two field seasons. Project funds were provided by the McLean Foundation and the MNR Species at Risk Stewardship Fund (in addition to MNR and NEC financial and in-kind contributions).

Analysis of changes to species composition and structure over a long-term period will allow an assessment of the effectiveness of the land use protection designations in the Niagara Escarpment Plan and inform the 2015 Plan Review. The project also allowed for collection of data on species at risk, which has contributed to the MNR’s Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC) database. An access database has been developed which will support data management and analysis.

Currently the NEC is undertaking a study with MNR, Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Inc. and others to re-examine a series of forest stands from the Niagara Gorge to the Flowerpot Islands off Tobermory first inventoried from 1979 to 1989. This will be important analysis of the effectiveness of management and policies within the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve.

**UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Review**

A 10-year periodic review of the UNESCO designation as a World Biosphere Reserve was initiated in 2012-2013. The Biosphere Reserve Review process began with the preparation of a ‘self-study’ document which was prepared by NEC staff on behalf of the Niagara Biosphere Reserve and submitted to the Canadian Commission for the UNESCO on June 30, 2012. External reviewers undertook site visits from Niagara to Tobermory in October 2012, accompanied by NEC staff and Steering Committee members, meeting with various partners and stakeholders, in preparation of the final review document submitted to UNESCO, which concluded that: "...the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve definitely merits continued membership in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves." The Report will be considered by UNESCO in 2014.

**11 Implementation Plan**

This three-year Business Plan will be implemented through annual Work Plans which will include specific priorities for each year. The Commission approved such an approach when it approved an Implementation Plan for its current four-year Strategic Plan. Since then, the NEC has been able to respond to the changing environment or unforeseen issues and opportunities, and has adjusted its priorities accordingly each year, and will continue to do so in future years on an annual basis, and more frequently, if required.
12 Communication Plan

Strategic Objectives

The Commission’s communications program is central to the agency’s mandate, daily operation and future success. The communications program centres on four interrelated and sustainable strategic objectives to:

1. Raise the profile of the Niagara Escarpment program and the Commission’s mandate
2. Strengthen partnerships and collaboration
3. Engage stakeholders and the public in the Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve
4. Provide media relations and information management

The communications plan is designed as a framework for the NEC’s strategic communications objectives and the deliverables / actions employed to achieve those goals. The plan is also designed to guide the annual workflow and output, and is to be reviewed annually to track its progress.

NEC communications functions on an annual budget of approximately $3,000. The NEC website provides up-to-date information including the monthly Commission Meeting agendas and materials. NEC uses the tools of social media (Twitter) to reach out to new audiences. Wherever possible the NEC partners with other organizations to promote the work of the NEC at events and conferences. A project to update the web site was initiated in 2013-14 and will be fully implemented in 2014-15. Improvements include compliance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act in 2005, access to French language services, and improved application form for Development Permits.

Context: NEC Strategic Plan

The NEC Strategic Plan identifies two key priorities for the communications program:

- Public engagement and outreach
- Strengthened partnerships and collaboration

The 2012-2016 Strategic Plan emphasizes these priorities and proposes to engage Commissioners more actively in promotion, as appropriate.
Objectives and Deliverables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Deliverables</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Raising the Profile of the Niagara Escarpment Program</td>
<td>• Website</td>
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<td>• Social Marketing: Twitter profiles</td>
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<td>• E-newsletter</td>
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<td>• Annual Report</td>
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<td>• Brochure and map series</td>
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<td>• Education program material</td>
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<td>2. Strengthening Partnerships and Capacity-Building</td>
<td>• Giant’s Rib Discovery Centre</td>
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<td>• Canadian Biosphere Reserves Association</td>
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<td>• Canadian Commission for UNESCO</td>
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<td>• Ontario Heritage Trust</td>
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<td>• Brock University</td>
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<td>3. Engaging Stakeholders and the Public in the Biosphere Reserve</td>
<td>• Increased collaboration with Niagara Escarpment stakeholders</td>
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<td>• Leading Edge Conference Series</td>
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<td>• Achievement Award Program</td>
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<td>• Conferences, events and presentations</td>
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<td>4. Media Relations and Information Management</td>
<td>• Building and maintaining positive media relations</td>
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<td>• Providing timely media service for Commission and staff use</td>
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<td>• Preparing briefing notes, contentious issues notes and backgrounders</td>
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<td>• Managing library and resource materials</td>
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<td>• News release</td>
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13 Conclusion

This Business Plan is submitted by the Chair of the Niagara Escarpment Commission to the Minister of Natural Resources in order to provide a three-year planning horizon of the Commission’s operations. It will be updated yearly.