RE-ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: THE RT. HON. HERB GRAY PARKWAY

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1.1 The Parkway Trail

The Rt. Hon. Herb Gray Parkway (the Parkway) is the Canadian access road portion of a new end-to-end transportation system for the Windsor-Detroit corridor. The Parkway was identified through the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) study, one of the most extensive environmental assessments ever undertaken by Ontario. The Parkway was approved under the Ontario Environmental Assessment Act and the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act in 2009 and construction began in 2011.

Windsor-Detroit is the busiest land border crossing in Canada. More than 9,000 transport trucks per day travel the corridor from Highway 401 to border crossings in Windsor. Prior to construction, communities on either side of the corridor were separated by the at-grade six lane roadway which also caused negative effects associated with congestion and traffic noise. The Rt. Hon. Herb Gray Parkway (the Parkway) now carries this international traffic through the same corridor via an international freeway connection and with a new service-road network allowing for separation of local traffic.

The Parkway’s below-grade highway design and series of 11 tunnels allows for unimpeded movement of pedestrians, wildlife and vehicular traffic across the corridor. An approximately 20 km multi-use trail serves to further connect communities along the corridor and provides an opportunity for active transportation using a primary and secondary trail system. The primary trail doubles as the Trans Canada Trail, and allows users to travel from one end to the other without encountering vehicular traffic through seven pedestrian bridges and two pedestrian tunnels. The secondary trail provides access to the primary trail as well as additional community and municipal trail connections, established through extensive consultation with local municipalities.

1.2 Trail Amenities

The trail provides an illuminated, fully paved pathway which is maintained year round. Along the trail, rest areas allow individuals to stop and enjoy the beautiful 120 hectares of landscaping that includes over 120,000 trees, shrubs and forbs representing 130 native species. The rest areas are furnished with a selection of decorative paving, seating areas, recycling and waste receptacles, trail maps, and emergency call stations.

1.3 Interpretive and Way Finding Signage

Along the trail are 12 interpretive signage panels that provide information to trail users. The interpretive signage speaks to the ecological significance of the region, local species at risk, the importance of tallgrass prairie, ecological restoration, aesthetic and engineering features of the Parkway, and First Nation culture and tradition.

2.1 Trail Access

There are 50 access points to the Parkway Trail including three major trailheads located at the east and west ends of the corridor. These access points connect residents to natural areas, recreational features and businesses, while also providing access to municipal and regional trail systems.
3.1 Ecological Protection and Restoration

One of the tunnels serves as an ecopassage. This ecopassage measures approximately 14,500 m² (approximately the size of nine NHL rinks), making it the largest in the Province. The ecopassage allows species at risk snakes and other wildlife to cross between the Spring Garden Natural Area and Oakwood Prairie; two natural areas separated by the construction of Huron Church Road in the 1920s. The design of the Parkway Trail on the ecopassage was modified to maximize habitat areas on the tunnel top. A second ecopassage was also constructed beneath the trail to allow snakes to cross the trail unharmed. Signage has been placed along the Trail (Brake for Snakes) in areas of known snake habitat.

4.1 Community Benefits

The Parkway Trail with its connection to the Trans Canada Trail, multiple connections to municipal trails, natural areas and many community access points, will be an important regional asset and will provide a unique opportunity for active transportation for residents and visitors to the area.

Keywords: Tallgrass prairie, ecological approach, First Nations, Species at Risk, below grade highway, ecopassage