

## WILDLIFE STRATEGY REVIEW

### WHAT COUNCILLORS NEED TO KNOW

#### **Learning From History**

The saying is that *“if you don’t learn from history, you are doomed to repeat it”*. We are concerned that this will be the case with the current Wildlife Strategy Review. Here is the background of why the Wildlife Strategy failed in 2010 and, more important, at the end of this Paper the very real pitfalls that will need to be avoided this time around.

#### **Correcting a Misstatement and Why It Matters:**

The Wildlife Strategy Review document states that *“the City’s Wildlife Strategy was originally developed in response to human-wildlife conflicts in the rural area of Ottawa”*. **This statement is incorrect.** It was the unwarranted killing of coyotes in the suburban community of Greenboro in Ottawa in 2010 that prompted the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre and a representative of Greenspace Alliance, along with several dozen residents, to urge the City to develop a Wildlife Strategy.

It matters because there are very different issues and views between agriculture interests and urban residents. This was clarified at the first meeting of the Working Group when the agriculture member asked why representatives of the hunting and trapping community were not invited to be members. Nick Stow, the Project Lead, replied that hunting and trapping and traditional wildlife resource management in general was beyond the mandate established by the Council motion, expressing his concern that an invitation to such groups might imply that those issues were on the table.

However, you will see later in this Paper how agriculture interests and the MNRF were allowed to co-op the Wildlife Strategy, essentially shutting it down. There is the potential for this to happen once again with the Wildlife Strategy Review and is why we have prepared this Paper as a cautionary tale.

#### **Wildlife Strategy – Motion Approved by Council on February 24, 2010**

The Motion approved stated that *“staff be directed to develop a comprehensive and integrated wildlife strategy for the City of Ottawa centred on wildlife-sensitive planning with a focus on public education and awareness programs and involve appropriate City departments, the National Capital Commission (NCC), the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), other relevant agencies and community stakeholder organizations in its development and implementation, including protocols to be required in conditions of plans of subdivision and site plans, and that said strategy go forward to a joint meeting of the Agricultural and Rural Affairs Committee and the Planning and Environment Committee for discussion”*.

#### **Working Group**

The Working Group of 17 members began meeting in May 2010. It included 5 community stakeholder organizations: Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre; Greenspace Alliance of Canada’s Capital, the Ontario Wildlife Coalition, the City’s Environmental Advisory Committee and the Forest and Greenspace Advisory Committee. Other members included City staff (By-law, Rural Affairs, Natural Systems); the Development Industry, Agriculture, MNR, NCC.

#### **Terms of Reference Approved**

After a number of meetings and much discussion, Terms of Reference were developed by the 17-member Working Group that reflected the intent of the Wildlife Strategy *“to move past reactive policies and actions”* and *“adopt proactive policies and actions that facilitate a more harmonious relationship with all wildlife”*.

The Terms of Reference were approved on November 8, 2010 by the majority of the Working Group, with 2 opposed being the representatives of the MNR and Agriculture, with decisions made by majority vote and dissenting opinions recorded in the Report.

In February 2011, Nick Stow circulated a detailed Wildlife Strategy-Interim Report, confirming the Terms of Reference along with a Workplan recommending demonstration projects for the Lester Road Wetland Complex, O'Keefe Drain and the Cardinal Creek Subwatershed Study that would provide progressive measures to coexist with beavers.

The Report outlined that the Working Group would continue meeting once a month with the objective of presenting a report to a joint meeting of the Planning and Environment Committee and the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee.

### **Wildlife Strategy Co-opted**

Despite the above, meetings of the Working Group were abruptly halted that very month, February 2011, without any explanation. What happened next shows the staff obstruction and political interference:

**February 12, 2012** – A year later, community organizations on the Working Group, upset about the lack of a meeting in over 12 months and dissatisfied with excuses for the delay, wrote to mayor Watson, expressing concern about the MNRF's media campaign that conveyed negative views about wildlife and the Wildlife Strategy. They urged that meetings get back underway.

The mayor's response was that the report was nearing completion and that it would be *"distributed to staff and members of the Working Group by the end of the month (February) with the goal to present the report to the Environment Committee once it has been revised to reflect the comments made by the Working Group members and staff. It will be consistent with Council's original intent and mandate which emphasizes the resolution of human-wildlife conflict through wildlife-sensitive planning and public education and follows the Working Group's Terms of Reference in reflecting an approach to human-wildlife conflict that essentially promotes co-existence."*

It is clear from FOI documents (see page 3 of this Paper) dated December 2, 2011 that the above letter from mayor Watson on February 12, 2012 was simply to continue stringing community organizations along given that the political fix was already in.

**June, 2012** – It was in late June, after a 16-month absence of meetings, that a draft Wildlife Strategy, not previously seen by the community organizations on the Working Group, was released. It was immediately controversial because wildlife would continue to be trapped and killed, while the reference to 'nuisance wildlife' throughout the report showed the staff's continued bias against coexistence.

**September 2012** – Frustrated by the process and the fact that none of the key recommendations made by community organizations that addressed the intent of the Strategy were included in the Report, wildlife organizations resigned, each submitting a detailed critique of the draft.

The public controversy escalated with articles in the media and letters to the mayor and councillors, resulting in the City dragging out the process for yet another year.

**May 3, 2013** – In a letter to community organizations, mayor Watson reversed the commitment made in his letter of February 12, 2012 that the Wildlife Strategy report would be presented to the Environment Committee. Instead, the mayor stated that the Wildlife Strategy would only be presented to the

Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee, indicating that ARAC's Terms of Reference show it has carriage of wildlife management strategies.

What mayor Watson conveniently ignores is that ARAC's Terms of Reference indicate its authority on these and other items are for matters '*outside the urban boundary*'. There was a great deal of public anger that mayor Watson had intervened and unilaterally turned the file over to ARAC, reversing the commitment made in his letter of February 2, 2012 and also overturning the Council motion that directed the Strategy be reviewed by a joint meeting of Planning and Environment and ARAC.

**May 2013** – Wildlife Strategy report released. The only change from the controversial draft was that the words 'nuisance wildlife' had been removed but the outcome for wildlife would be the same with the on-going trapping and killing of beavers and other wildlife and little, if any, support for wildlife-sensitive planning or public education that would benefit residents.

**May-June, 2013** – There were over 100 personal emails to the mayor and individual councillors and 2,100 residents that signed a petition strongly critical of the Strategy and the decision for it to only be presented to ARAC, urging that a public consultation be held in the Fall.

The only response from the City was an on-line consultation that was highly publicized in rural newspapers but absent in urban media.

**July 4, 2013** – On the July 1<sup>st</sup> holiday week, the Wildlife Strategy was presented at the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee rather than at a joint meeting of Planning and Environment and ARAC, as specified in the 2010 Wildlife Strategy Council motion.

In spite of strong opposition from community organizations and residents that spoke at the meeting, the Wildlife Strategy was approved.

### **FOI Documents Expose What Led to the Failure of the Wildlife Strategy**

Community organizations had filed an FOI application in October 2012 to find out what had occurred behind the scenes at the City to have resulted in the Wildlife Strategy becoming such a debacle. It shows the political deals made in the mayor's office and the manipulation by the city bureaucracy that was against the public interest.

It was a 3 ½ year costly exercise for taxpayers not to mention the waste of time for community volunteer organizations that has left the City, a decade later, without a progressive Wildlife Strategy and continuing public anger, as seen this past year, over the unwarranted killing of wildlife in Ottawa. FOI documents uncovered the following:

- Unbeknownst to the Working Group, the Mayor received an 'Alternate Proposal' to the Wildlife Strategy from the Rural Affairs office in the Fall of 2011. The 'Alternate Proposal' was from the Eastern Ontario Deer Advisory Committee (EODAC), a hunting and trapping advocacy group, aligned with the MNRF's traditional wildlife resource management role.

The EODA Proposal is in complete contrast to the coexistence model intended by the Wildlife Strategy, in that the EODAC categorizes all urban wildlife as a 'nuisance' subject for removal.

- A briefing note sent by the City Manager's office at 4:11 p.m. on December 2, 2011 laid out a detailed schedule of when the Wildlife Strategy would be reviewed by the Working Group and

internal staff before going to the Planning and Environment and Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committees.

Less than an hour later, the Mayor's Senior Policy Advisor put the brakes on the plan, saying he would like to *"chat further about some balanced offers to help develop the strategy"*, referring to the 'Alternate Proposal' from the Eastern Ontario Deer Advisory Committee.

- A letter from Mayor Watson sent to two community organizations indicates that there were several members of the Working Group who had voted in favour of the Terms of Reference at the meeting who later withdrew their support, although this was never brought forward at a meeting of the Working Group as should have happened.
- The Agriculture and MNRF representatives who opposed the proposed Terms of Reference were on record. As such, we are left to wonder who these several individuals are that, anonymously, withdrew their support. Also, given that there were 17 members on the Working Group, with majority voting rules in place, why would the opposition of just 4 members (with two unnamed) result in the cancellation of work already planned on the Wildlife Strategy?

Also, why, when all 5 of the community organizations on the Working Group provided detailed submissions during the Wildlife Strategy public consultation, was there not a single submission from the those on the Working Group that were in opposition.

### **Urban Wildlife Issues – the Responsibility of the Environment and Climate Change Committee**

Following the controversy around the Wildlife Strategy in 2013, there was substantial public pressure to see urban wildlife placed within the mandate of the Environment Committee. It resulted in the motion to include urban wildlife responsibilities in the Environment Committee's Terms of Reference that was approved by City Council on November 9, 2016 and renewed in the 2022-2026 ECC's Terms of Reference.

### **Environment and Climate Change Committee - Terms of Reference Sustainability**

Preserving/promoting biodiversity, including but not limited to protecting/coexisting with urban wildlife, particularly with respect to matters that are not specifically within the mandates of other Standing Committees, and in conjunction with related Council-approved strategies, protocols, and initiatives such as the Wildlife Strategy

### **Wildlife Strategy Review – Pitfalls That Must Be Avoided in 2023**

#### **1) Agriculture interests and the MNRF will continue to oppose a Wildlife Strategy based on coexistence**

The Wildlife Strategy in 2010 didn't happen because the City decided it should have a Wildlife Strategy. It happened because of public pressure and the determination of Ottawa residents to see an effective and humane response to wildlife concerns in the city.

The 2010 Wildlife Strategy failed, however, because it was co-opted by Agriculture interests and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. These interests share a traditional resource management view of wildlife which is entirely different from that of urban residents.

The political interference of mayor Watson along with city staff who opposed the Wildlife Strategy was clearly evident when the 'Alternate Proposal' of the Eastern Ontario Deer Advisory Committee, a hunting

and trapping advocacy group that categorize urban wildlife as a 'nuisance' subject to removal, was chosen over a Wildlife Strategy that was based on coexistence.

**MNR:** This Ministry has maintained for decades that it has no responsibility for urban wildlife issues as these concerns are the product of development and therefore the sole mandate of municipal government. The Ministry's focus with respect to wildlife is one of traditional resource management. Over 60% of its Fish and Wildlife Department budget comes from licence revenue from hunters, trappers and fishers so that is who they consider their 'clientele'. Thus, it's not surprising that the Ministry's response to wildlife conflicts is to recommend a trapper.

There is an increasing disconnect between the majority of the public and MNR's view of wildlife. This was highlighted recently in the media <https://www.cp24.com/news/a-sport-of-cruelty-ex-conservation-officers-against-ontario-hunting-dog-expansion-1.6420706> when the MNR approved extending and expanding the widely-condemned practice of placing live wildlife in enclosed compounds for the purpose of training hunting dogs, something that even former conservation officers strongly opposed, giving examples of the cruelty they had observed.

**Agriculture:** Farmers mostly support the traditional approach to wildlife management as there is a close affiliation between the MNR and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. The affiliation provides a variety of programs and services to farmers, including compensation for livestock loss due to wildlife predation.

The Agriculture representative on the Wildlife Strategy Working Group in 2010 was, for example, a farmer as well as a trapper licenced by the MNR.

The significant influence that agriculture interests had in shutting down the Wildlife Strategy motivated the Ottawa public to demand in 2016 that urban wildlife responsibilities be moved to the Environment Committee.

As several community organizations expressed in their presentations to the Committee *"just as farmers would reject urban residents deciding on how wildlife should be managed on a farm property, so too would it be unacceptable for farm practices with respect to wildlife be used in residential neighbourhoods in the City"*.

**Concern:** At a meeting of community organizations this past June, the city staff member responsible for the Wildlife Strategy Review indicated that he was consulting with an agriculture organization on the Strategy. This raises a real concern given the undue influence that agriculture had in shutting down the Wildlife Strategy in 2010 by decisions made behind closed doors, an 'Alternate Proposal' to the Wildlife Strategy that the public was forced to obtain through FOI, and the intervention of mayor Watson who directed the Wildlife Strategy solely to ARAC for approval, in opposition to the original Council motion.

## **2) Staff Opposition to a Progressive Wildlife Strategy**

In a letter from mayor Watson in 2013, he indicated that in addition to the Agriculture and MNR representatives on the Working Group who publicly voted against the Wildlife Strategy Terms of Reference, there were several other (unnamed) members who had voted in support but later, privately, withdrew that support due to their discomfort around *"beaver management and the content of public service messages"*.

**Concern:** Again, this past June, new light was shed on who these anonymous Working Group members were when the person in charge of the Wildlife Strategy Review confirmed they were city staff who were strongly opposed to the Strategy.

This explains the continuing opposition by City staff to a progressive Wildlife Strategy, particularly in adopting proven and cost-effective flow device technology in managing beavers.

Previous and recent FOI documents show a long-standing, overly-chummy relationship between City staff in By-law and Regulatory Services and the MNRF and city drainage staff and licensed trappers that is not in the public interest. These relationships have led to entrenched ways of doing business given self-interest and reciprocal benefits leading to the strong reluctance to change, resulting in little accountability and a serious lack of transparency on the part of city staff.

### **3) Transparency**

Throughout the 3 ½ year process between 2010-2013 that resulted in a failed Wildlife Strategy there was, as shown in this Paper, a total lack of transparency. Unfortunately, this continues to be the hallmark of how certain city staff elect to deal with the public.

Just recently, we were chastised by a city staff member via a personal phone call for including residents and their councillor's assistant in what has been a widely-shared, year-long open email dialogue about a wetland issue in the Ward. Nothing confidential or previously unknown to any of the parties involved was shared and yet it prompted the city staff member to provide a lecture on the difference between, as he stated *"formal or official correspondence and informal or unofficial correspondence – the latter being more of a conversation between two parties"*, saying *"he would have to re-evaluate what information he shared with our organization in the future"*.

We vehemently disagree with this view. It has been the one-on-one private conversations intended to control the discussion, the withholding of information from the public and councillors and the unwillingness to meet as a group and openly share information around a table that has resulted in the lack of accountability by staff and the loss of public trust.

#### **Summary**

A key factor in achieving the goal for *"a revised Wildlife Strategy that reflects modern day practices to co-exist with wildlife in our City"* makes it critical to understand the interests that still exist among those who prevailed in preventing a progressive Wildlife Strategy a decade ago.

Not one of these interests – MNRF, Agriculture or City staff - submitted any comments for the public record that outlined their opposition. They were able to entirely derail the process with private deals made behind the scenes.

This time around, the public consultation needs to include the names of organizations consulted and their recommendations in advance of the Environment and Climate Change Committee's deliberations. Demonstrating transparency will be of critical importance in regaining public trust in the City of Ottawa.