

Halifax asked to help pay for important 'piece of the puzzle' at Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes

Zane Woodford (Zane.Woodford@saltwire.com)

Published: 19 hours ago

Updated: 18 hours ago



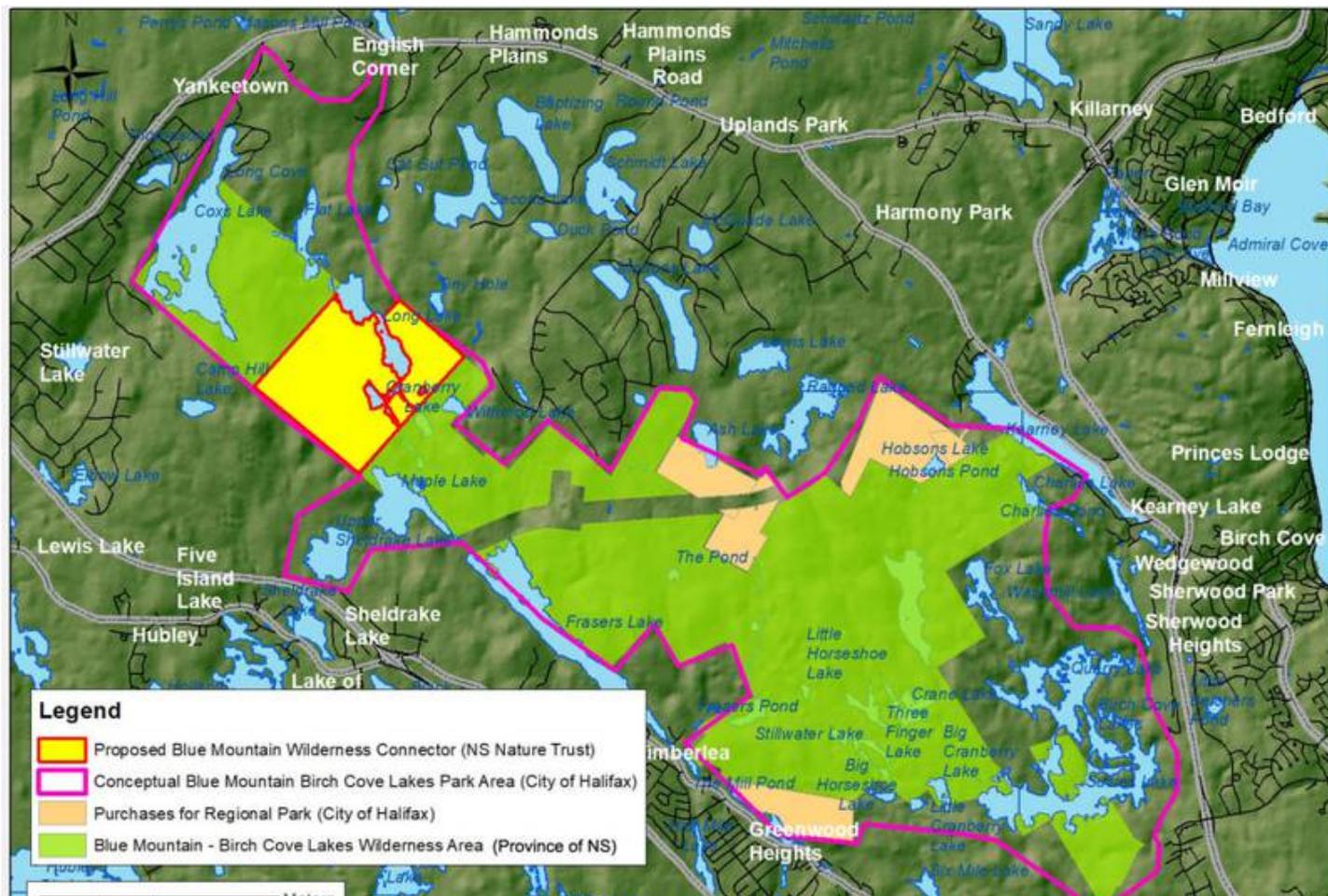
The Blue Mountain Wilderness Connector will preserve a valuable forest and wetlands link between habitats for wildlife in the southwestern area of mainland Halifax. - Nova Scotia Nature Trust - Contributed



HALIFAX, N.S. — The Nova Scotia Nature Trust is calling it an “easy win” for Halifax, asking the city for \$750,000 toward the purchase of a 232-hectare parcel of the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes wilderness area.

The provincial government protected 1,300 hectares of the land — located between Bayers Lake and Hammonds Plains — in 2009, and increased the protected area to 1,700 hectares in 2015.

But there's a gap in that provincially-protected land, breaking up a strip nearly 12 kilometres long.



A map of the area that the Nova Scotia Nature Trust is raising money to purchase, to preserve a link for wildlife between the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes preserve and the wild habitat further inland. - Contributed

The Nova Scotia Nature Trust, which buys up land to protect it in perpetuity, announced a campaign last fall to buy that 232-hectare gap from the private landowners.

“We showed them just how important this piece of the puzzle is,” Nature Trust conservation project coordinator Allison Thorne told council’s environment committee on Thursday, March 5.

“We showed them that protecting this block not only fills a large gap, but protects the land around it too.”

Thorne told the committee that the property, which the Nature Trust calls the Blue Mountain Wilderness Connector, is at risk, with developers and industry closing in. Protecting it, she said, will ensure connectivity for hundreds of species at risk and for recreation.

The property owners have agreed to sell the land well below market value, making an in-kind donation of the difference. The Nature Trust is fundraising with the public, and looking to secure federal and provincial cash.

Thorne was at the environment committee to make a pitch for the municipal share, \$750,000.

"Supporting this project is an easy win for Halifax," she said. "It's been recognized by the city as a high-value area for conservation as far back as 1971."

What's the city's role?

The city has indeed promised a park in the area, acting as a buffer zone around the provincially-protected land, for more than a decade. It slowly started buying up pieces of land over the last few years, securing more than 200 hectares in 2018 and 2019.

For the coming year, the municipality's parkland acquisition budget was slashed back down to about \$500,000 from \$7 million in 2019-2020. There is, however, a municipal savings account for these types of purchases.

And this proposal is a bargain compared to the city's past purchases, Thorne argued, with the city's share only making up about 30 per cent of the total cost.

Richard Vinson with the group Friends of Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes made the same pitch during the meeting's public comments section.

"Looking at the long haul, surely that is an incredible investment," he told the committee, saying the area could be Halifax's Central Park.

Councillors on the committee were receptive to the idea, speaking in favour of the wilderness lands, and heard that municipal staff are already working on a report.

Thorne said the Nature Trust wrote a letter to Mayor Mike Savage asking for the funding in November and heard before the end of the year that he'd passed it along to municipal staff.

What's next?

Planning director Kelly Denty confirmed that municipal staff were already working on a report on the request.

"I think it's well in process and the presentation is at a good point in time," planning director Kelly Denty told the committee.

Thorne said the Nature Trust has until June to raise the money and fulfill its agreement of purchase and sale with the landowners. It needs to raise \$1.6 million to purchase the land, and a total of \$2.1 million to plan the stewardship of the property and establish an endowment fund to protect it into the future.

The Nature Trust is collecting donations at nsnt.ca/giving/donate/wildblue.

Zane Woodford is a Halifax-based journalist for SALT and SaltWire.com

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