



A Vision for Blackstone Park in Stittsville Comments on Draft Conceptual Design

Submitted by: Janet Mason, Chair, Ottawa Stewardship Council
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It's a July summer day in Stittsville only three years from now. In the new, open-to-the-sky hardscape of a new neighbourhood people naturally converge on Blackstone Park with its splash pad, tennis courts, children's play area, and wood chip pathways that lead to cooling green space. Walking between the soccer fields many are drawn to the bright flowers, sounds of birds, and dancing butterflies at the southern edge of the park. The path meanders into an oasis: a meadow set with young saplings of oak, butternut, and hickory that promise a future harvest. The licorice smell of elderberry blossoms fills the air. Fruit has started to set on the wild blackberries, raspberries, and grape vines. Pollinators flit among the flowers. People sit on the benches to relax, children chase butterflies, blood pressures lower, a sense of well-being pervades.

I attended the Stittsville Parks Public Information Session on 8 February 2018 on behalf of the Ottawa Stewardship Council (OSC). As a key stakeholder in the City's development of an Urban Forest Management Plan (UFMP), the OSC appreciates being given the opportunity to provide feedback on public green space. Decisions made now on tree and shrub species and their location will have a long lasting impact on the health and well-being of the Blackstone community.

The OSC has two related comments on the proposed design of Blackstone Park:

1. support for an urban food forest area, and
2. better integration with the adjacent natural corridor by planting native species.

In the recent survey conducted by the Blackstone Fernbank Crossing Community Association, "Natural Environment" was rated as the most highly valuable aspect of the park by more respondents (97 out of 183) over any other category. Over 36% (79 out of 216) rated having a permaculture/food forest area in the park as Very Important or Somewhat Important. Both of these desires can be accommodated in the same area with no impact on other planned facilities or on the cost of the park.

Support for Urban Food Forest Area

City Council approved the UFMP in June 2017. Recommendations 17, 23, and 25 all promote the development of edible forest resources in Ottawa:

- Recommendation 17 – Develop an urban tree product utilization strategy.
 - Implementation Guidance – “Consider opportunities to coordinate the safe *collection of food from City-owned fruit and nut trees.*”

- Recommendation 23 – Develop and implement an urban forest outreach and engagement strategy.
 - Implementation Guidance – “Highlight alternative urban tree values, such as *harvesting food*.”
- Recommendation 25 – Promote and facilitate the development and implementation of Neighbourhood Stewardship Plans.
 - Implementation Guidance – “*Consider appropriate opportunities for the planting of fruit and nut trees* and coordinating the collection of food from existing fruit and nut trees in neighbourhoods.”

Blackstone Park is an excellent candidate for a naturalized edible forest area due to its size (3.25 ha) and its location next to a natural corridor, Mahoney Creek (aka Monahan Drain), which lies on the park’s southern boundary.

The OSC understands that ongoing maintenance of a park (e.g. lawn mowing, pruning) must be easy to carry out and cost effective. Locating the naturalized edible area adjacent to the drain corridor allows it to gradually blend in and integrate with it, thus eliminating the need to mow or prune shrubs.

The pathway currently located above #14 in the Conceptual Design can be moved south into the edible/natural area. Accessibility can be achieved by using woodchips suitable for wheelchairs and walkers, allowing all members of the community to enjoy the benefits of being in nature.

Integration with the Corridor through Use of Native Species

The OSC commends the use of native trees and shrubs like Shagbark Hickory, American Hornbeam, and Serviceberry in the Conceptual Design. However, we would like to see the elimination of the following non-native species: Japanese Tree Lilac and Scots Pine (which are dying from a fungus throughout Ottawa). These can be replaced with other trees listed in the plan and/or with trees list below.

To meet the needs of both an edible forest and a natural area, the following trees and shrubs should be considered:

- White Oak (*Quercus alba*) – its acorns are quite palatable.
- Basswood (*Tilia americana*) – tea can be made from its flowers.
- Butternut (*Juglans cinerea*) – canker-resistant trees can be obtained from RVCA’s Butternut Recovery Program.
- Black Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), High Bush Cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*), Common Blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*), and Wild Grapes (*Vitis riparia*) – plant these native shrubs/vines along the edge of the drain where they can spread and naturalize.

It is understood that the drain must be accessible for maintenance/clean-out. All of the shrubs listed above will regenerate naturally if disturbed by a backhoe. The drain

corridor itself can be seeded with native wildflowers to attract birds and butterflies.

Development of the edible/natural area can be done at no extra cost to the City. The OSC can apply for funding to purchase trees, shrubs, and wildflower seed mixes. For example, Tree Canada provides up to \$4000 under its Edible Trees program to community groups to plant edible trees and shrubs on publicly accessible sites. This includes logistical support from Tree Canada. Community volunteers will plant and care for the seedlings. We can develop interpretive signs to educate people about the edible forest and the health benefits of the natural area.

Summary

The desire of the Blackstone/Fernbank Crossing community for a natural area and a food forest can be accommodated by allocating land along the park's southern boundary to both functions. This approach also satisfies the recommendations of Ottawa's Urban Forest Management Plan to promote the planting of fruit and nut trees. The OSC can work with the BFCCA to obtain grants that pay for the trees, shrubs, seeds, benches, and interpretive signs at no cost to the City. Best of all, this bold vision for a natural, edible area within a new suburban park will benefit the nascent Blackstone community early on and long into the future. It will also be a focus for community stewardship and collaboration, and serve as an example for other new neighbourhoods to follow.