

# Mandate changes for Ecology Centre

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Staff Writer

The future role of the Willow Park Ecology Centre as an active place for students learning about the environment has been downgraded to a passive recreation area.

Halton Hills council approved the change in mandate upon recommendations of the Willow Park Review Committee (WPRC), last month.

"We're not saying goodbye to Willow Park by any stretch of the imagination," said Ward 2 Councillor and WPRC committee member Joan Robson. "They (the Willow Park steering committee) will continue with the funding (\$7,800) that we have had for them in the budget up to this time. ... Just to say, this will... become a more passive type of family recreational park ... being able to work the trails, see the butterfly garden, and see the hibernaculum. ... It will be educational but not as it has been in the past two years with school programming funded by (Ontario Trillium Fund)."

After a year-long review of operations of the park under the auspices of the Willow Park Ecology Centre steering committee (WPECSC), the WPRC recommended that activities at the Centre would no longer include school programming, WPEC-run summer camps and capital construction projects, (unless approved by council or those already under way with grant funding) an independent website, office space, newsletters or educational materials not funded through the town's operating budget.

However, WPECSC will continue, under a new Management Agreement, to provide park stewardship such as maintaining the trails and gardens for passive recreation and promoting ecological awareness in schools and community events.

"(The decision) in no way negates the work that has been done over the seven or eight years with Willow Park," said Robson.

Willow Park Ecology Centre has been operating since 1999 under the auspices of the WPECSC, a sub-committee of the Town's Environmental Advisory Committee (TEAC). Last year the group of volunteers had rejected a Town request to incorporate into a separate group under a Management Agreement, which would see them responsible for securing their own funding and insurance coverage. But at the same time, the group requested a 2007 Town budget increase from \$10,000 a year to \$25,000 that would include \$21,000 salary for a co-ordinator. The group also requested office space at a Town facility.

According to the review committee, WPECSC's decision to remain unincorporated without a Management Agreement put the Town into a "vulnerable (liability) position", hence the decision to reduce the activities at the ecology centre. The WPRC added that similar volunteer organizations have been requested, and have signed Management Agreements, and to allow WPECSC to continue without one would be unfair.

"We had to take a look at all the various committees of council and the groups that work with the Town such as Limehouse Kiln Society and HH-Dog and we have to create some sort of level playing field," said Robson. "Willow Park was innovative enough

that they went out and got funding from Trillium and they worked with that funding and they've done a great job. But it now comes back to us and are we prepared to give, say, \$30,000 a year to them and not to the other groups which are also working very hard and doing so on a volunteer basis?"

Robson said the door has been left open for the WPECSC should they wish to incorporate and "provided they can show us how they can achieve the funding, then that is always a possibility."

"The committee looks forward to continuing to plan and implement park stewardship, activities and events," WPEC co-ordinator Tunde Otto-Harris told council.

The committee is still exploring a partnership with POWER (Protect Our Water and Environmental Resources) to provide school programming.

WPEC may also still promote environmental awareness through the Recreation and Parks Department's organized summer camps or Credit Valley Conservation stewardship programs. The volunteer committee will still be required to sign a Management Agreement, which sets out the responsibilities of both the group and the Town.

"An exciting future lies ahead for Willow Park, and we look forward to embracing it with council and the community of Halton Hills," said Otto-Harris.



One of the scenic paths to be found at the Willow Park Ecology Centre. *File photo*

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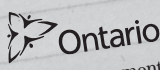
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