DRAFT 1.3

December 3, 2023

Hunt Club Community Association

Affordable Housing and Urban Planning Committee

Record of Discussion - November 29, 2023

**Riverwood Park:**

**Butternut Tree, Black Ash, and Biodiversity**

*Present:  Patrick Morton, Peter Brimacombe, Tania Mushka, Andrei Grushman, Audrey Belanger-Baur, Owen Clarkin (Ottawa Field Naturalist’s Club)*

**1.  Introduction**

The Committee discussed the results of Owen Clarkin’s site visit to Riverwood Park with Jakob Mueller (President, OFNC) on November 26.

The purpose of the visit was to assess the possible impact on Riverwood Park of a proposed multi-use pathway extending from the new Taggart development to the Kimberwick stormwater pond.

The key findings relate to the health of a Butternut tree which is slated for removal, the discovery of abundant Black Ash near the pathway route, and evidence of “very impressive” biodiversity in the Park as a whole *(see Annex A for Owen’s photographs).*

**2.  Butternut**

The Butternut is one of only two tree species that have been listed as “endangered” in Ontario since 2008. It is threatened by Butternut Canker, *“a fungal disease that spreads quickly and can kill a tree within a few years…surveys in eastern Ontario show that most trees are infected, and perhaps one-third have already been killed”*[[1]](#footnote-1).

Some infected trees live for many years and experts hope that this is an indication of resistance to the disease. The tree in Riverwood Park is mature (45-75 years old) and very healthy.  There is no significant cankering and it does not appear to have hybridized with Japanese Walnut.  It is rare to find such healthy trees in the Ottawa area (perhaps 1-5% of the Butternut population).

No other Butternuts were observed in these woods and there appear to be none in McCarthy Woods.  The nearest are at Hog’s Back (and possibly north of the CPR bridge), and it appears that Riverwood Park provides a very favourable habitat for Butternut.

In our view, it makes no sense to remove an endangered “high value” tree for the sake of a pathway which can be moved a few metres to accommodate it.   As Owen noted, we should *“mould the pathway to the natural features, not the other way round”*.  There is also some concern that the residential development at the top of the ridge will affect drainage and reduce the available water for the tree.

**3. Black Ash**

Taggart’s initial Environmental Impact Study (EIS) had noted only one Black Ash near the river in the floodplain[[2]](#footnote-2).  We were therefore surprised to learn that Black Ash is “dominant” near the north end of the proposed pathway.  This casts the proposal in an entirely new light.

As Owen noted, Black Ash was listed under Ontario’s *Endangered Species Act* in January 2022 - but protection measures were suspended for two years. Although an expert panel has since developed a wide-ranging “recovery strategy”, the government now proposes to provide only limited protection for the Black Ash[[3]](#footnote-3).

In addition to the Emerald Ash Borer, the survival of Black Ash is threatened by habitat loss.  With respect to Riverwood Park, we will need more detail from the developer about the exact route of the pathway, the extent of tree removal, and the findings of the second EIS survey this past summer.

**4.  Biodiversity**

In addition to the endangered Butternut and Black Ash, as Owen has reported, the downslope forest contains “one of the most biodiverse old second growth woodlots in the city of Ottawa”.  There is, for example, a large Yellow Birch near the Butternut which is likely at least 150 years old.  There are also uncommon trees such as Peachleaf Willow, Hemlock, White Cedar, Striped Maple, and Mountain Maple.

The initial EIS study acknowledges that Riverwood Park contains “significant” woodland and valleyland, and that it may provide suitable habitat for an additional seven threatened or endangered species (such as the Blanding’s Turtle and the Red-Headed Woodpecker). Field surveys in 2023 were scheduled to provide more details on these features.

The proposed multi-use pathway will be routed along the bottom of the steep slope and will use stonedust rather than paving in order to reduce runoff. However, the “Sugar Maple forest” (0.53 ha) at the edge of the significant woodland will be removed during construction and there will be an impact on the valleyland as well. The steep slope and other affected areas will be “re-naturalized’ with native grasses, shrubs, and trees after construction.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Riverwood Park is owned by the City of Ottawa and is an “Environmental Protection” (EP) zone. It was designated as “Urban Natural Area #147” in D.F. Brunton’s 2002 report for the City of Ottawa.  Mr. Brunton’s report listed 132 native plant species in Riverwood Park, including 15 high-value species in need of conservation[[5]](#footnote-5).

**4.  Next Steps**

The HCCA has recently requested a copy of the final EIS from Taggart, and we will follow up with the City to track it down as soon as possible.  Taggart’s re-zoning application is now likely to be heard in early 2024, which will not leave much time to prepare a response if we do not receive the revised application in the near future.

We discussed the possibility of a nature walk in Riverwood Park to further assess the impact of the proposed pathway.  It was agreed that we would set up a walk with Owen and his OFNC colleagues in due course, and that their expertise would be very helpful as we prepare a position statement on Taggart’s development application.

1. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/butternut-species-risk> “Endangered” means the species lives is facing “imminent extinction or extirpation”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kilgour & Associates, *Initial Environmental Impact Study* (January, 2023), p. 30. The initial study was based on short field visits in the fall of 2021 and 2022. Five additional field surveys were planned for the 2023 field season. <https://devapps.ottawa.ca/en/applications/D02-02-23-0004/details>

 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Black Ash in eastern Ontario will need to be “healthy” and at least 8cm in diameter to receive habitat protection within a 30m radius, unless an exemption or permit for removal is approved by the Ministry. <https://ontarionature.org/endangered-black-ash-blog/>; <https://ero.ontario.ca/notice/019-7378> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kilgour, *EIS*, pp. 33-34. See Figure 11, p. 26. The Butternut is on the line marked as “Edge of Disturbance”, which extends on either side of the pathway and includes the slope to the valleyland. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.*, Appendix E. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)