

**Subject: Rural Environmental Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program
Terms of Reference and Property Selection Criteria**

File Number: ACS2025-SI-CCR-0005

**Report to Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee on 4 September 2025
and Council 10 September 2025**

**Submitted on August 26, 2025 by Nichole Hoover-Bienasz, Director, Climate
Change and Resiliency, Strategic Initiatives Department**

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Ward: Citywide

**Objet : Cadre de référence du Programme d'acquisition et de gestion de
terres écologiques rurales et critères de sélection des propriétés**

Dossier : ACS2025-SI-CCR-0005

Rapport au Comité de l'agriculture et des affaires rurales

le 4 septembre 2025

et au Conseil le 10 septembre 2025

**Soumis le 26 août 2025 par Nichole Hoover-Bienasz, Directrice, Services des
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Quartier : À l'échelle de la ville

REPORT RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee recommends:

That Council approve the proposed Terms of Reference for the Rural Environmental Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program, attached as Document 1, including the proposed Property Selection Criteria.

RECOMMANDATION(S) DU RAPPORT

Que le Comité de l'agriculture et des affaires rurales recommande ce qui suit :

Que le Conseil approuve le cadre de référence proposé pour le Programme d'acquisition et de gestion de terres écologiques rurales, ci-joint en tant que document 1, ainsi que les critères suggérés pour la sélection des propriétés.

BACKGROUND

The City's Natural Systems team has been responsible for rural environmental land acquisition since shortly after amalgamation, primarily by responding to landowner requests to purchase or accept their properties for conservation. More recently, the rural environmental land acquisition program's scope and budget was expanded to include stewardship activities. In late 2023, a full-time staff position was allocated to support wetland conservation and to take a more strategic and proactive approach to environmental land acquisition and stewardship, in cooperation with local partners. This work implements Provincial and Official Plan policies to protect and enhance the City's Natural Heritage System (NHS) as well as contributing to the Official Plan goal of no net loss of rural forests and wetlands.

In 2024, while considering the [staff report](#) recommending acquisition of 5689 Ferry Road, the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee (ARAC) and Council identified the need for greater transparency, clarity, and rigour regarding the project approval process and procedures. On January 29th, 2025, Council carried the amended [Motion No. 2025 – 50-19](#) requesting staff to:

“...provide a report to the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee and Council no later than the end of Q2 2025 that clarifies and updates the criteria for acquiring natural lands in the rural area to ensure that the City's goals of natural system preservation are met”. This report has been prepared in response to the motion and further recommends that ARAC and Council approve a Terms of Reference for the Rural Environmental Land

Acquisition and Stewardship Program (Document 1) which includes clear, updated property selection criteria.

DISCUSSION

The Rural Environmental Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program (the Program) is intended to undertake and support conservation projects across rural Ottawa to protect and enhance the Natural Heritage System (NHS). The Program has recently taken on a more proactive and collaborative approach and requires a defined framework to guide staff and partners while ensuring appropriate oversight. A draft Terms of Reference has been developed, which is expected to improve program delivery, increase public transparency, clarify roles and responsibilities for staff and internal stakeholders, and guide consultation with rural Councillors who oversee the program. This will enable staff to more effectively complete conservation work in rural Ottawa and implement Provincial and Official Plan policies to protect and enhance the City's NHS as well as other rural forests and wetlands.

The City has a history of securing environmental lands for protection and public benefit, extending back to the former municipalities and Regional government. Beginning shortly after amalgamation and the adoption of the City's new Official Plan, the Natural Systems team was provided the mandate to support policies relating to environmental land conservation by continuing to acquire properties, but only in response to requests from private landowners. There was no dedicated staff or funding allocated to this work, and few properties were successfully acquired. Eventually, the budget for rural land acquisitions was increased, and the scope of the program expanded to include stewardship actions, but staff resources remained limited to taking a reactive approach. Some examples of properties acquired during this time include:

- Manotick Mahogany Woodlot (Drumlin Forest) – 2016
- Honeywell Property (Carp Hills) – 2018
- The Vars Wellhead (Cumberland Forest) – 2019
- Balice Property (Richmond Fen) – 2020

In late 2023, Council approved a new position in the City's Natural Systems team to focus on wetland conservation and restoration. The new position has allowed development of a more strategic and proactive Rural Environmental Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program. This program aims to better protect and enhance the City's Natural Heritage System as required by the policies in Sections 4.8, 5.6.4, and 11.6 of

the Official Plan, and consistent with the policies in Section 4.1 of the [2024 Provincial Planning Statement](#) (PPS). Staff engaged with local partners such as the three Conservation Authorities, the National Capital Commission, Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) and other related groups to discuss our respective priorities and identify potential opportunities for collaboration. Staff then proceeded to develop preliminary criteria for internal use in determining which opportunities to pursue. These opportunities included property acquisitions (by the City or by partners using City funds) as well as stewardship projects on lands in public ownership. All property acquisition opportunities involved lands that were being offered to the City or its partners directly or had been publicly listed for sale.

Within the Program's work to date, each project is assessed individually, rated against selection criteria, and carried out either singly or in collaboration with local partners involved in similar work. The funds for rural acquisition and stewardship come from the existing Natural Area Acquisition capital budget established by Council for this purpose. The City's long-range financial plan includes projected allocations of \$2 million annually to fund this Program. Budget allocations were previously overseen by the Environment and Climate Change Committee but will in future be presented to the ARAC under their [revised Terms of Reference](#). The Program and budget support Council's strategic priority of a Green and Resilient City.

In late 2024, during consideration of the acquisition of a property at 5689 Ferry Road, the Ward Councillor raised concerns regarding the transparency, clarity, and rigour of the Program. On December 11, 2024, the Finance and Corporate Services Committee provided Council with [Report No. ACS2024-SI-HSI-0028](#). This report was referred via the [Referral Motion No. 2024 - 48-18](#) to the January 23rd 2025 ARAC meeting for consideration, and a direction was made to amend the Terms of Reference of the ARAC to include all matters related to rural land acquisition.

On January 23, 2025, the ARAC considered the Acquisition of Property 5689 Ferry Road Referral and carried the report recommendations as amended by [Motion No. ARAC 2025-20-02](#). The amendments introduced the recommendations that staff provide a list of City lands that could benefit from additional protection/conservation as well as update and clarify the property selection criteria applied to acquisitions and stewardship projects.

On January 29, 2025, Council carried as amended [Motion No. 2025 – 50-19](#)

requesting staff to:

“...provide a report to the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee and Council no later than the end of Q2 2025 that clarifies and updates the criteria for acquiring natural lands in the rural area to ensure that the City’s goals of natural system preservation are met”.

In response to Committee and Council’s request in early 2025 to provide more clarity around the criteria used to select properties for acquisition, staff have prepared a draft Terms of Reference for the Program (Document 1). The Terms of Reference include an updated set of criteria to be used in identifying and prioritizing properties for acquisition and/or stewardship projects (Document 1, Appendix A). They also establish a clear framework for the Program as a whole, with a defined vision, purpose, goals, and objectives. The draft document has been developed with reference to applicable Official Plan and corporate policies around land use, property acquisition, delegation of authority, and Committee oversight.

An ARAC and Council approved Program Terms of Reference (Document 1) with Property Selection Criteria (Appendix A) will support the effective development and implementation of a proactive rural conservation and stewardship program. Implementing these recommendations is expected to improve the delivery and the socio-economic value of environmental conservation work within rural Ottawa.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no financial implications associated with implementing the report recommendation. Lands acquired through the program will continue to be funded, subject to Council approval, through the annual budget process and in accordance with the Long-Range Financial Plan.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no legal impediment to the adoption of the recommendation in this report.

COMMENTS BY THE WARD COUNCILLOR(S)

Staff consulted with the Chair and Vice-Chair of ARAC and invited all rural Councillors to provide input and feedback on the draft Program Terms of Reference. Staff incorporated feedback where appropriate and applicable (e.g., Councillors will now be consulted on all proposed acquisitions within their wards).

Comments were received from Councillor Skalski and Councillor Kelly.

Councillor Skalski commented on the consultation with Councillors for acquisition of properties valued at over \$500,000. She asked if consultation or notification could be

included as a best practice for all acquisitions and asked for clarification on the purpose of the consultation with the Councillor.

Councillor Kelly commented that given the speculative and development pressures on properties closer to the urban boundary, he would like to see consideration of increased points in the scoring system for proximity to the urban boundary

CONSULTATION

Public consultation was not part of the development of this internal process.

Staff consulted with the Chair and Vice-Chair of ARAC and invited all rural Councillors to provide input and feedback on the draft Program Terms of Reference.

ACCESSIBILITY IMPACTS

The approved Program Terms of Reference will be published on Ottawa.ca in accessible format.

ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

There are no immediate asset management implications associated with implementing the report recommendations. Natural Systems staff will work with Asset Management and other staff as needed to ensure appropriate management of any assets associated with environmental lands acquired by the City under the Program.

CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

Climate change issues have been considered in the development of the Program, which addresses climate change in the following ways:

- Fosters increased resiliency of the City to the impacts of climate change in the following areas:
 - Water cycle
 - Water quality and quantity
 - Biodiversity
 - Managing natural hazards
 - Managing forest and wetland health
- Conserves and enhances the ecological integrity and functions of Ottawa's rural Natural Heritage System of core natural areas and natural linkage areas.
- Supports the Official Plan policy of no net loss of rural forests and wetlands.
- Contributes to climate mitigation through carbon storage and sequestration.

- Increases the area of forest subject to sustainable management for forest health, wildland fire risk, and resiliency to climate change.
- Increases the area of wetland providing mitigation of flood hazards and risk.
- Improves climate resilience through conservation/restoration of wetlands and shorelines and their ability to filter, cool, and retain excess water from increased storms and floods.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

There are beneficial economic implications by implementing the recommendations of this report. The Program's purpose is to invest City resources strategically to conserve and steward natural lands in Ottawa's rural area for the long-term, in accordance with Provincial and municipal policies for natural heritage, agriculture, and growth. The expected outcomes will improve the quality of place for Ottawa residents, visitors and students and will support environmental sustainability by:

- Maximizing the value of City's investments through partnerships and cost-effective mechanisms for conservation and stewardship.
- Increasing the area of public natural lands accessible to residents for compatible recreational uses across the City.
- Increasing the financial and in-kind value of partnerships for conservation and stewardship of lands within the natural heritage system.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of the Program under the approved Terms of Reference will result in the conservation and enhancement of rural environmental lands and is expected to have positive effects on land, air and water quality, forest and wetland cover, habitat for species at risk and other wildlife, and access to nature for residents and visitors. The Program Terms of Reference align with the Provincial Planning Statement, Official Plan policies, and the Term of Council priority of creating a green and resilient City.

INDIGENOUS GENDER AND EQUITY IMPLICATIONS

Indigenous Policy Considerations

Staff reached out to the communities and organizations of the Algonquin Host Nation regarding conservation priorities during the early stages of development for the program. A meeting was held with the Planning Office of the Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn First Nation. Staff will continue to consult with the Algonquin Host Nation

on individual projects as required.

Gender and Equity Implications

There are no gender and equity implications.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

There are no risk implications.

RURAL IMPLICATIONS

The implementation of the Program under the approved Terms of Reference will positively affect rural residents by conserving and enhancing environmental lands, increasing the ecological goods and services provided by those lands (e.g., access to nature, clean air and water, flood mitigation, etc.). All real estate transactions conducted under the Program will continue to be voluntary on the part of the landowner. The City will not seek to acquire lands for conservation if the landowner is not a willing participant.

TERM OF COUNCIL PRIORITIES

The recommendations of this report will directly support the Council priority of creating a green and resilient City by protecting and enhancing the City's Natural Heritage System. The program will support this City-wide, with a focus on rural lands.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION

Document 1 – Rural Environmental Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program Terms of Reference

DISPOSITION

Following approval by Council, Natural Systems and other Strategic Initiatives staff will implement the Program in accordance with the Terms of Reference.

Document 1

Rural Environmental Land Acquisition and Stewardship Program Terms of Reference

Vision

Ottawa's vibrant rural landscape includes a self-sustaining, connected, and biodiverse system of natural habitats providing residents with the benefits of nature, recreational opportunities, and clean air and water.

Purpose

To invest City resources strategically to conserve and steward natural lands in Ottawa's rural area for the long-term, in accordance with Provincial and municipal policies for natural heritage, agriculture, and growth.

Goals

- Conserve and enhance the integrity and ecological functions of Ottawa's rural Natural Heritage System of core natural areas and natural linkage areas.
- Support the Official Plan policy of no net loss of rural forests and wetlands.
- Contribution to climate mitigation through carbon storage and sequestration.
- Foster increased resiliency of the City to the impacts of climate change in the following areas:
 - Water cycle
 - Water quality and quantity
 - Biodiversity
 - Managing natural hazards
 - Managing forest and wetland health
- Facilitate access to public natural lands for compatible recreational uses.
- Maximize the value of City's investments through partnerships and cost-effective mechanisms for conservation and stewardship.

Objectives

- Improve the integrity of the natural heritage system through protective ownership, conservation easements, or conservation or stewardship agreements.
- Maintain or increase the amount of natural forest and wetland cover within the natural heritage system.

- Maintain or increase the area of core/linkage lands subject to stewardship for improvement of ecological functions and biodiversity.
- Maintain or increase the amount of shoreline or riparian area in natural vegetation cover.
- Increase the area of forest subject to sustainable management for forest health, wildland fire risk, and resiliency to climate change.
- Increase the area of wetland providing mitigation of flood hazards and risk.
- Increase the area of public natural lands accessible to residents for compatible recreational uses across the City.
- Increase the financial and in-kind value of partnerships for conservation and stewardship of lands within the natural heritage system.

Scope

This program delivers conservation and stewardship in rural Ottawa. The program prioritizes projects within the Natural Heritage System (NHS) as mapped in the Ottawa Official Plan (OP) as well as projects in support of OP policies to ensure No Net Loss of rural forests and wetlands. This is accomplished using various tools to secure lands for long-term conservation, support public and private land stewardship, and to improve the ecological function and services provided by these lands.

Roles and Responsibilities

This program is delivered by staff within the Natural Systems Branch of the Strategic Initiatives Department. Its successful delivery requires the services and expertise of other internal City groups such as Realty Services and Legal Services as well as external partners.

The City recognizes its responsibility to consult with the Indigenous Host Nation on matters relating to land conservation and stewardship.

Program partners are identified as those non-profit public agencies, non-profit corporations or non-profit land trusts who are actively securing and managing conservation lands in rural Ottawa.

Program partners include (as of 2025):

- Mississippi Valley Conservation Authority
- Rideau Valley Conservation Authority (and Foundation)

- South Nation Conservation Authority
- Friends of the Carp Hills
- Mississippi Madawaska Land Trust
- National Capital Commission
- Ducks Unlimited Canada
- Nature Conservancy of Canada
- ALUS East
- ALUS Mississippi-Rideau

Council oversight of the program is led by ARAC in accordance with their revised Terms of Reference as approved by Council on July 23, 2025. The program is funded through annual capital budget allocations as outlined in the Long-Range Financial Plan.

Disbursement of funds is managed in accordance with the Delegation of Authority By-law No. 2025-69 (as amended). Disbursements above delegation thresholds will be presented to ARAC for their review and recommendation to Council. Staff will report back annually to ARAC on acquisitions and projects from the previous year.

The local Ward Councillor will be consulted on potential acquisitions or stewardship projects in their ward prior to staff recommendation or decision.

Tools

- The City may acquire lands through:
 - fee simple acquisition
 - joint fee simple acquisition with established partners.
 - donation to the City
 - private land tax default
 - the development review process
- The City may conserve and manage privately or publicly owned lands through the application of a conservation easement on land title.
- The City may conserve and enhance lands by entering into agreements with partners to provide financial or in-kind support for land purchase, management, or stewardship on both private and public lands.

- The City may transfer land to Partners or the Indigenous Host Nation for the purpose of conservation, restoration, and long-term environmental protection and management.

Principles

- Sustainable
 - cost-effective and efficient
 - socially beneficial
 - environmentally beneficial
- Voluntary
 - Land securement and stewardship involving private landowners is voluntary
- Risk Mitigation
 - Decisions will consider corporate financial, reputational, and legal liabilities and risks
- Collaborative and Strategic
 - The program will be consistent with all objectives and policies of the Official Plan
 - The Program looks to leverage and align with Council Priorities, Corporate strategic priorities, and City and Partner programs and grants
 - The program is implemented in collaboration with internal and external partners
- Accountable and Transparent
 - The program is guided by [Council approved] Terms of Reference
 - Staff will report annually [to ARAC] on implementation of the program
 - Staff will review the program every four years (term of Council)
 - The financial limit of delegated authority for spending under the program will be in accordance with the Delegation of Authority By-law No. 2025-69, as amended

Priorities

Prioritization of program properties and projects is based on City Policies, Program Goals and Objectives and acquisition criteria and process as outlined in Appendix A.

Appendix A: Property Acquisition and Stewardship Selection Criteria

Key Considerations in the Acquisition and Stewardship Process

- *Review Land Sale Listings*: The team monitors property listings (monthly) for potential acquisitions.
- *Recommendations from Partners*: Receive recommendations from local conservation partners.
- *Project Proposals*: Consider land acquisitions and stewardship project proposals from partners for funding and support.
- *City's Land Inventory Review*: Assess the City's existing properties for potential stewardship opportunities.
- *Federal Ecological Gifts Program*: Receive parcels of land via the program.
- *Private Landowner Proposals*: Engage with private landowners wishing to conserve their properties through sale or donation to the City.
- *Undevelopable Properties*: Evaluate properties in specific zoning areas that align with the Official Plan for potential acquisition.

Acquisition Selection Criteria and Prioritization

The acquisitions are evaluated based on a set of internal criteria that determines which properties to prioritize. Properties are assessed using a simple 5-point scale, with each criterion worth one (1) point.

The overall score determines the prioritization:

0: Do not pursue

1-2: Check back / find out more

3: It could be a good opportunity, but others are better

4: Great opportunity if price goes down to fair market value and other issues are mitigated

5 or more: Excellent, proceed to next phase of due diligence.

Table 1. Acquisition and Stewardship Criteria Scoring

Criteria	Description	Finding	Score
Natural Heritage System	Is the property part of or adjacent to Core Areas and Linkage Areas?	Yes, Core or Linkage	1 point
Ecology and Restoration	Does the property have current or potential ecological features, such as being adjacent to other conservation areas, containing species at risk, wetlands, areas suitable for ecological restoration, etc.?	Yes, ecological values	1 point
Cost	Is the price of the property reasonable (considering fair market value)?	Yes, near fair market value	1 point
Social & Location Concerns	Are there any significant issues with the location or condition of the site (political, historical use, etc.)?	No issues	1 point
Partners	Is there a potential partner (for purchase, management, or stewardship)?	Yes	1 point
Direct Sale (Bonus Point)	Did the seller voluntarily approach the City?	Yes	1 point
Potential Development Risk (Bonus Point)	Is there a significant risk of future development or change in land use that would negatively impact the natural values of the property? (Note: this point may only be awarded during final prioritization, if the property meets required screening criteria).	Yes	1 point

Process for Acquiring Property

Each project is assessed on a case-by-case basis. The process is fluid and dynamic and does not follow a predetermined selection cycle. Properties found for sale follow these steps before an offer is made on the property.

1. **Initial Screening:** The lead Planner conducts a preliminary evaluation of available properties to determine whether they meet the expected criteria based on our acquisition scoring system.

2. **Property Collation:** A summary document is compiled, listing each available property for review by Natural Systems staff. This document includes mapping, listing links, addresses, sizes, zoning, PIN numbers, ecological information, and additional relevant notes.
3. **Discussion and Evaluation:** Natural Systems staff convene to review the available properties. During this meeting, each property is rated based on the five-point acquisition criteria.
4. **Score Assignment:** A score is assigned to each property based on group consensus.
5. **Prioritization:** The properties are ranked, with those receiving the highest scores identified as top priorities.
6. **Pursuit of Top Priorities:** Staff focus on pursuing the highest-priority properties, considering available funds and staff resources. Any property scoring 5 or higher enters a second round of review for a deeper assessment of property criteria and prioritization. In cases where multiple properties score highly, further discussions with supporting groups help determine which project should take precedence, factoring in staff capacity and external partnership opportunities.
7. **Director Approval:** The top-priority property is presented to the Director, Climate Change and Resiliency, to notify them of the intent to submit a Realty Services request for further research into the property's acquisition potential.
8. **Consult with Ward Councillor:** Staff will consult with the ward Councillor before proceeding further. If the project proceeds to an agreement under delegated authority, then the Councillor's comments will be included in the Delegated Authority Report.
9. **Realty Services Request:** A formal request is submitted to Realty Services to initiate background research, including investigating land use history, fair market value, and other relevant details.
10. **Evaluation of Realty Services Findings:** Once Realty Services returns their findings, the Natural Systems team reviews the data. If the listing price aligns closely with the fair market value and the site's land use history is complete, Natural Systems re-assesses available funds, staffing, partners, and ongoing costs, then decides whether to proceed with making an offer.

11. **Funding Commitment:** Natural Systems allocates funds based on an estimated property cost provided by Realty Services, alongside additional funds for the management and stewardship of the property post-acquisition. This ensures that the budget is carefully managed and not overstretched.
12. **Making an Offer:** An offer is extended to the seller, with conditions including a requirement for an environmental site assessment, approval from the appropriate Committee or Council, legal review, and other necessary approvals.
13. **Seeking Approval:** Where required, staff will bring forward a report to Committee and Council seeking approval of the acquisition.
14. **Property Management and Stewardship Planning:** Initial plans for the property's management and stewardship are developed, with most work deferred until the property is officially transferred to City ownership. This approach allows for stakeholder involvement and helps manage internal staff resources effectively.

The decision-making process that staff follow for each potential property is also displayed in a flow chart in Figure 1: Property Decision Flow Chart below.

Figure 1: Property Decision Flow Chart

