

Meech Creek Valley

Land Use Concept

Joint Planning Project

Final Report

October 1998

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This document presents the final results of a planning project for the Meech Creek Valley. It outlines a vision statement, planning principles and objectives and describes a land use concept. This concept has been submitted to and approved by the National Capital Commission (June 30, 1998) and approved in principle by the Municipal Council of the Municipality of Chelsea (June 1, 1998). The Municipal Council of Chelsea approved the project on October 5, 1998.

When the National Capital Commission acquired the Meech Creek Valley in 1994 it presented an extraordinary planning opportunity as well as a significant challenge. This document is the result of the efforts of the Commission, the Municipality of Chelsea and the many stakeholders who participated in the planning workshop and public consultations. While the planning process is not yet finished, this document signals the end of one phase and the beginning of another. Key decisions have been made concerning future land uses in the Valley as well as the administrative status of these lands. These decisions include:

- Placing the entire Valley within the boundaries of Gatineau Park;
- Maintaining the pastoral landscape as the dominant natural feature;
- Defining three land uses (Preserved Natural, Preserved Open and Special Management zones); and
- Setting aside approximately 20% of the Valley for the development of appropriately scaled recreational/tourism services and activities.

The next phase of the project will focus on implementing the actions required to achieve the objectives of this plan.

1.0 Location of the Meech Creek Valley

The Meech Creek Valley is located twenty-five kilometers north of Parliament Hill in the Municipality of Chelsea, Quebec. Bordered by Gatineau Park to the west and the future right-of-way for Highway 5 to the east, this 634-hectare (1400-acre) property was acquired by the National Capital Commission in 1994 from the Communauté urbaine de l'Outaouais.

2.0 Land Acquisition Context

There were two primary reasons for the Commission's acquisition of the valley:

- to consolidate the ownership of land within the boundary of Gatineau Park; and
- to be able to influence future land use in an area of significant importance to the National Capital Region.

In return for the funds required to complete the acquisition, the Commission made a commitment to the Treasury Board of Canada to recover the cost of the property through partial development of the land.

3.0 History

Originally settled in the 1800s the Meech Creek Valley represents the remnants of what was once a typical Gatineau River Valley farming community. When the land was expropriated by the Québec government in the mid-seventies

for the development of a zoo, there were over ten farms. In the twenty years since the land was acquired, many of the houses and barns were demolished and the farmland abandoned. Land use today includes; residential, farming, a model airplane runway and, a trail access point and parking area for Gatineau Park.

4.0 Planning Environment

In *the Gatineau Park Master Plan* (1990), the area of Gatineau Park adjacent to the Valley is designated as a "discovery zone" which emphasizes moderate levels of conservation and use. The future Highway 5 corridor forms the eastern boundary of the valley. The construction of this road is not expected within the next fifteen years. The Valley has the potential to play a pivotal role in the development of the recreation/tourism based economy for the region, given its location adjacent to Gatineau Park and the Gatineau River and mid-way between Old Chelsea and Wakefield.

Within the Schéma d'aménagement of the MRC-des-Collines, the Meech Creek Valley is given a "récréotouristique" designation. According to the Chelsea Urban Development Plan, the site is zoned C5, which is a commercial zoning oriented towards recreation/tourism type use such as inns, golf courses, ski hills and public uses. The Urban Plan also recommends the preparation of a Comprehensive Development Program for the Valley.

5.0 Planning and Land Management Issues

Some of the key land use planning and management issues of the Meech Creek Valley include:

- the future of farming activities within the valley and the environmental impact of the current farming practices;
- the existence of an abandoned mine, several sand pits and a domestic dump site in the Valley;
- the question of existing and future road access points to the Valley. Road access is a determining factor in the location of development areas (Cross Loop, Pine Road or a new access road from the end of Highway 5 at Tulip Valley);
- the tenuous connections to the past (distinctive landscape, covered bridge, cemetery, few remaining buildings) need to be preserved and enhanced in order that the future of the Valley can be built on these features;
- the regional land use plan and municipal zoning allow for recreational tourism uses such as inns and restaurants;
- the existence of previously identified management issues (soil erosion, pollution of the creek, unsustainable farming practices, gradual diminishment of the distinctive landscape character) which need to be considered within a future land use plan;
- the need for detailed land use zoning for the Valley to reflect its multiple roles and uses and to preserve the character of the landscape;
- the future relationship of the Valley to Gatineau Park, to the Gatineau River corridor and to other regional attractions such as the Wakefield train, golf courses and ski hills will need to be clearly defined;
- the preservation of the distinctive landscape and historical features of the Valley while introducing new recreational-tourism activities and land uses; and
- the presence of a model airplane flying site in the north end of the Meech Creek Valley (*Les Ailerons*).

6.0 Vision Statement

As a first step in the planning process for the Valley, the National Capital Commission believed that it was important to define a planning vision. This was done through the preparation of a long term vision statement:

*The Meech Creek Valley represents an extraordinary opportunity to realize a completely new means of achieving the mandate of the National Capital Commission. Based on the Commission's desire to support the environmental integrity of Gatineau Park, to conserve the distinctive landscape of the Meech Creek Valley and to spur the development of a sustainable recreation and tourism based economy in the Outaouais, the development and long term management of the valley will be achieved by working in partnership with the residents of Chelsea, the local and regional governments as well as with the private sector. The goal of the Commission **will not be to dictate a specific development plan but to provide a framework to guide the type, scale and location of development** while allowing the latitude for innovative ideas and approaches.*

7.0 Planning Principles and Objectives

Four key planning principles and a series of planning objectives were derived from the vision statement. While these objectives have been used in the preparation of a land use concept they will also form the basis of the Municipality of Chelsea's Comprehensive Development Program for the lands in the Meech Creek Valley.

- * The preservation of the distinctive landscape and the protection of the environmental integrity of Gatineau Park.
 - Minimize the impact of all activities upon the environment;
 - Restore natural processes in areas where the natural landscape has been degraded;
 - Support technologies that will preserve or improve existing natural conditions;
 - Minimize the visual impact of hydro and communication wires;
 - Reduce to a minimum the impact of development upon drainage basins and watercourses;
 - Encourage activities which do not create greenhouse gases;
 - Encourage the protection and, where required, rehabilitation of watercourses within the Valley;
 - Encourage the use of alternative energy technologies such as wind or solar power
 - Support recycling and composting of waste;
 - Reinforce the pastoral character of the Valley;
 - Protect existing habitat for species native to the valley; and
 - Increase knowledge of the valley's ecological functions.

- * The development of financially viable attractions and services which will support the Commission's mandate and revenue objectives while creating a stimulus for the recreational tourism based economy of the Outaouais.
 - Promote a thematic concept based on a range of recreational and cultural activities that respect the natural environment and Canadian heritage;
 - Seek to identify and fill gaps in the services and attractions presently offered in the region;
 - Encourage activities which create opportunities for interaction among participants and which promote physical activity; and
 - Support projects that will encourage overnight visits to the Valley and which will contribute to the development of the local economy.

- * The creation of destination attractions within the Meech Creek Valley based on recreational and cultural vocations.
 - Present the Valley as a model for the protection and enhancement of the natural environment;

- Seek a mixture of attractions and services based on the intrinsic features of the valley and its location within Gatineau Park;
- Offer viewpoints that permit an observation of the historical and cultural elements of the Valley;
- Encourage the creation of arts and crafts based upon native materials and the growing of produce using organic farming methods;
- Establish architectural norms that will promote Canadian heritage; and
- Promote and protect Canadian heritage.

✱ The Meech Creek Valley should be physically linked to Gatineau Park trail network and the Gatineau River recreational corridor.

- Establish linkages between the Valley and important natural features outside of the Park (e.g. Gatineau River);
- Support access to and within the valley by hikers, cyclists and skiers;
- Promote non-motorized means of transportation within the Valley;
- Establish the primary vehicular access at the north end of the Valley (via the Cross Loop road);
- Minimize changes to the existing road network; and
- Limit access by motorized vehicles to areas south of the covered bridge.

8.0 Land Use Concept

The vision statement, planning principles and planning objectives set the context for the future management and development of the Meech Creek Valley and they form the basis of the land use concept.

The land use concept is built upon two key decisions:

- The first decision was to integrate all of the valley lands west of the future highway 5 corridor into Gatineau Park (571 hectares). This offers a high level of protection to the important natural features of the valley and ensures a uniform approach to their management.
- The second decision was to develop three separate land use designations (Preserved Natural Landscapes, Preserved Open Landscapes, Special Management Zones) and to apply these to the parts of the Valley that fall within the boundaries of Gatineau Park. Specific guidelines, reflecting the distinctive characteristics of the designated areas, have been prepared to direct their use and management. It is proposed that definitions of the three land use designations, as well as the boundaries of the individual areas, be enshrined in future versions of the Gatineau Park Master Plan, as well as in the revised Municipality of Chelsea Master Plan (to be completed in the spring of 1999).

8.1 Preserved Natural Landscapes

One of the original reasons for the National Capital Commission's acquisition of the valley was to consolidate its ownership of lands within the Gatineau Park boundary and to provide a buffer to the core protected areas of the Park. To this end, approximately fifty percent (50%) of the valley (313 hectares) has been designated as preserved natural land or areas where natural processes will dominate and human activities will be limited. Many of these areas are presently fields and they will gradually evolve to become forests. Other areas, such as along the Meech Creek, will require rehabilitation.

8.2 Preserved Open Landscapes

The concept emphasizes the preservation of the pastoral character of the valley with approximately twenty percent (20%) of the total surface area dedicated to agricultural activities or other uses that will maintain the open landscape. This character however, will not be maintained at any cost. Any use will require adherence to the NCC land use guidelines.

8.3 Special Management Zones

The land use concept proposes the introduction of recreational and tourism activities into the Valley. Approximately twenty percent (20%) of the land area has been set aside for the development of appropriately scaled activities, such as interpretation facilities, restaurants, inns, shops and galleries. It is also proposed that the more intensive uses be concentrated in the northern end of the valley with motorized access via the Cross Loop Road. Emphasis south of the covered bridge will be placed on non-motorized activities, such as cycling and walking, and vehicular access will be limited.

8.4 Other Land

Of the land acquired by the NCC, nine percent (9%) is contained within the right-of-way for the future Highway 5 and one percent (1%) of the land is outside the Gatineau Park boundary and is earmarked for disposal.

9.0 Summary of proposed land use

Land Use	Hectares	Percentage
Preserved Natural	320	50%
Preserved Open	128	20%
Special Management	123	20%
Future Highway 5	57	9%
Disposal	6	1
Total	634	100%

10.0 Definitions of proposed land use

10.1 Preserved Natural Landscapes

Preserved natural landscapes are areas where no development is to take place and where natural processes will predominate. In certain locations the processes will have to be re-established gradually. The preserved natural landscapes consist primarily of the following:

- Areas where there is significant, sustainable biodiversity. These are generally rocky highland areas never used for pasture or, as in the southern part of the valley, farming land that was abandoned more than twenty years ago and where natural regeneration has occurred.
- Hazard lands that have a combination of steep slopes and marine clays and are located near Meech Creek or its primary tributary.
- Buffer areas, which in future will act as transitional zones between Highway 5 and the valley lands proper or areas adjacent to the Meech Creek and its tributaries.

Guidelines for Preserved Natural Landscapes

- Protect watershed through the use of re-naturalized buffer areas;
- Emphasize the designation of large blocks of land and ensure connectivity to existing natural areas where possible;
- Create wildlife corridors and facilitate natural propagation;
- Provide aural and visual buffers from the existing and future Highway 5 corridor;
- Provide transition zones between developed areas along the highway corridor and the "Heart of the Park" within Gatineau Park;
- Allow natural processes to dominate;
- Protect existing habitat for species native to the Valley;
- Prohibit grazing or other agricultural use; and
- Follow parameters of "Discovery" zoning of Gatineau Park within the context of the Valley (e.g. narrow corridors or areas surrounded by development).

10.2 Preserved Open Landscapes

The open landscapes are one of the defining characteristics of the Valley and their long term preservation is a priority. At the same time however, grazing has had a significant impact on the natural values of these landscapes.

The primary objective for these lands is to create a more sustainable open landscape either by reducing the impact of cattle grazing (surface erosion, pollution of the creek, loss of natural vegetation) or by introducing new uses which will accomplish the same objective. The Commission intends to maintain the character of the landscape without incurring significant management costs. This may be accomplished through the use of long term agricultural leases or other management practices such as prescribed burns. In the case of agriculture, a farm management plan is required. This plan must specify measures to ensure the sustainability of the activity.

Guidelines for Preserved Open Landscapes

- Establish fenced buffer areas to protect watercourses and areas with steep slopes and/or unstable soils;
- Construct bridges across watercourses and fenced laneways to connect fields;
- Require the use of water troughs or other alternative to replace cattle drinking directly from the creek;
- Examine alternative means of maintaining the open space character of the landscape; and
- Allow infrastructure related to agricultural use.

10.3 Special Management Zones

The Special Management Zones include the following land uses:

- Existing residential properties;
- Rehabilitation sites which include several abandoned gravel pits and a domestic waste site;
- Development sites for recreational and tourism functions; and
- Fields used for grazing and hay cultivation.

The Special Management Zones includes three areas (40 hectares each) which offer potential for development projects requiring large amounts of land (e.g. botanical gardens, horseback riding centre, etc.) and a series of ten

individual sites (2 to 5 hectares) designated for smaller recreational tourism uses (interpretation facilities, inns, restaurants, galleries and studios, etc.). The selection of each site has been based on the unique advantages or potential that it offers (e.g. views, exposure, access to Gatineau Park, availability of high quality agricultural land, road access, existing buildings).

10.3.1 Selection and Management of Recreational and Tourism Activities

The Commission proposes that development of the recreational and tourism projects be done on a request for proposal (RFP) basis. Approved projects will be developed on the basis of a long term land lease, while ownership of the buildings and related infrastructures will rest with the proponent. Each project will be assessed under the federal environmental assessment process and will be evaluated using the planning principles and objectives outlined on pages 4 and 5 of this document.

The perceived advantages of the approach includes the minimization of impact upon the valley by concentrating development in limited areas and, the increased potential for stimulating recreational and tourism projects by clustering complementary activities together. It will also offer the opportunity to re-introduce a stronger human presence in the Valley without altering the distinctive character of the landscape and with the possibility of integrating management and development objectives.

10.3.2 Development Site Parameters

The following are the parameters that have been used to identify potential development sites within the Special Management Zones.

Access

- Accessible by existing roads.

Environment

- Adequate land mass to support designated uses;
- Low ecological value (in terms of biodiversity, ecosystem integrity, buffer);
- Sites which are or have been impacted by human activities;
- Stable soils;
- Slopes generally <20%;
- Topsoil of a depth of at least 1 metre over 50% of the site;
- Adequate water resources; and
- Minimum 100 metre buffer to any watercourse.

Visual Assessment

- Protection of scenic views; and
- Limited visual impact (potential to integrate development with the landscape).

Zoning

- Existing C5 (Recreational Tourism) zoning; and
- Compatible with adjacent land uses.

Guidelines for Special Management Zones

- Apply the federal environmental assessment and review process to all proposed projects;
- Establish tools to monitor and assess long term trends and impacts of activities within the valley;
- Specify the appropriate type and scale of development
- Use the planning principles and objectives as the basis for the assessment of future activities;
- Gradually convert certain buildings that are presently leased for residential purposes to commercial uses;
- Use the request for proposal process (RFP) as a means of soliciting projects;
- Analyze motorized access and circulation requirements for all proposed projects within the context of the designation of the Cross Loop road as the primary entrance in the north and the limited motorized access south of the covered bridge;
- Designate the cemetery, covered bridge and one of the original farmhouses as elements of historic interest.

11.0 Future Steps

- The National Capital Commission will prepare a Commissioning Plan that will detail the future steps for the project, as well as responsibilities and timelines for the completion of each task.
- The Municipality of Chelsea is presently revising its Municipal Plan. As part of this exercise it will zone the Valley according to the designations proposed in the land use concept. It is also the Municipality's intention to complete a Comprehensive Development Program for the Valley. This planning tool, through the use of detailed zoning bylaws, will ensure that the Municipality and the Commission will be able to achieve the planning objectives for the Valley.
- The National Capital Commission has committed to the preparation of an independent assessment of the agricultural potential of the Valley. This study will determine the types and intensities of agricultural use, as well as propose alternative means of maintaining the open landscape where agriculture is not environmentally sustainable.