

Working Together

The Beaver Hills Initiative

By Courtney Rupertus

The Beaver Hills Initiative (BHI) began in 2002 in order to understand and discuss the impact of population growth and land development on this unique bioregion, and establish objective recommendations for land management planning. This work led to the development of the BHI Land Management Framework, which incorporates science-based information and social, economic and environmental values as an essential part of land use decisions.

Dee Patriquin, an environmental consultant who was fundamental in the development of the framework says, “Our aim is to conserve the area’s ‘natural capital,’ which consists of land and water resources, ecosystems and biodiversity, and are all susceptible to deterioration. In short, we want to conserve the essential character of Beaver Hills.”

The Beaver Hills/ Cooking Lake Moraine lies 20 minutes east of Edmonton. The melting ice from a glacial retreat over 10,000 years ago left behind a 1600 sq. km geophysical feature consisting of rolling knob and kettle terrain. Higher in elevation than the surrounding Parkland, it is also cooler and wetter, and supports many wetlands and lakes. Considered a sub-region of Alberta’s boreal forest natural region, Beaver Hills supports high biodiversity in plants and wildlife, including over 250 bird species.

The project’s vision and values are aimed at conserving the natural beauty and features of the moraine and the life it sustains, while supporting cooperative efforts to provide recommendations to guide land use decision makers.

The first step was to identify natural capital and establish principles for its use. This information was consolidated into the framework document and showcases areas of natural capital along with best environmental planning recommendations. The document is a resource for municipalities to control and direct development while conserving the ecological value of the Beaver Hills bioregion.

“We provide recommendations for the consideration of municipalities,” said Candace Vanin, a BHI board member and land use analyst with Agriculture Canada. “If you see value in it, make use of it.”

The project has faced challenges along the way: staff changes, political changes, misunderstanding about intent as well as ongoing land use pressures that may result in long-term consequences if not managed collectively. But it has also achieved results. “Our main accomplishment to date has been bringing municipalities and land developers consistent and reliable information, which they can use as they see fit,” says Dee.

The Beaver Hills Initiative not a legal entity (the acting fiscal agent is Strathcona County), and support by all partners is purely voluntary. The initiative encourages team work and cooperation; rather than making decisions for the municipalities, the BHI partnership provides an avenue for collaboration.