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Canadian and US Mayors reject rhetoric, stand united for shared economic prosperity

Mayors pledge to protect urban natural spaces, contribute to national target

Ajax, ON, June 14, 2018 – At the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative annual conference in Ajax, Canadian and US mayors celebrated the strong, integrated relationship on environment and economy that binds our two countries and the Great Lakes St. Lawrence region as a whole. The mayors cautioned against isolationist policies towards trade and environmental protection.

“As mayors in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence region, we represent a community of common interest, dedicated to the protection of our shared waters and our integrated economic prosperity,” said incoming Cities Initiative chair Sandra Cooper, Mayor of Collingwood.

If the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region were a country, encompassing Quebec, Ontario and the eight Great Lake states, it would be the world’s third largest economy. It also holds 20% of the world’s fresh water. Due to the integrated nature of its economy, both sides of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region would be seriously impacted by the imposition of trade tariffs.

“The mayors of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region are the keepers of the flame of our special cross border relationship,” said Paul Dyster, mayor of Niagara Falls NY and immediate past president of the Cities Initiative, “American mayors of the Cities Initiative stand shoulder to shoulder with our Canadian cousins in the face of escalating rhetoric that threatens to damage 200 years of peace and economic prosperity in the region”.

Also at the conference, civic leaders announced the creation of the Mayors’ Council on Nature and Communities, an exciting new venture to create natural spaces in urbanized areas and contribute to national efforts to reach the UN Convention on Biodiversity 17% natural spaces target by 2020. The initiative will begin in Ontario as a regional pilot, chaired by Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie, with vice-chair Mitch Twolan, mayor of Huron-Kinloss.

The first meeting of the Mayors Council on Nature and Cities was held at the annual gathering of mayors and other advocates for the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence. At the meeting, member mayors agreed to identify existing protected spaces, create new ones, and determine how to connect them to better protect habitat and migratory pathways in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region.

“Connecting nature to people, and people to nature is the best antidote to our fast paced and screen addicted lives,” said Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie, chair of the Mayors’ Council on Nature and Cities, “People don’t need to drive long distances to experience nature when it can be found right in our own backyard. Natural spaces nurture our mental health, make our cities more resilient to climate change, and can support species habitat and migration through the region.”

The Mayors’ Council will work in coordination with national efforts to meet the target under the international Convention on Biodiversity, to protect 17% of land and freshwater by 2020.

“Wetlands and naturalized shorelines are critical habitat for so many of our indigenous species in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence Region,” said Suzie Miron, Councillor from the City of Montréal and representative of Mayor Valerie Plante, Cities Initiative board member, “As mayors, we need to find ways to naturalize our shorelines and connect terrestrial habitat and migratory pathways throughout the region.”

At the conference, the annual Wege Award, in recognition of forward-looking sustainability projects in smaller municipalities, was given to Tay Township in conjunction with the Townships of Tiny and Severn, Town of Midland, and Severn Sound Environmental Association (SSEA) for their multi-municipality invasive species project to address environmental and socio-economic impacts of invasive species.

“Since invasive species are not restricted by municipal borders, cross-municipal collaboration is critical,” said Scott Warnock, mayor of Tay Township and Cities Initiative board member. “This partnership with the Townships of Tiny and Severn, Town of Midland, and SSEA will improve environmental integrity and water quality, strengthen the natural resource and tourism-based economy, and foster community well-being by promoting connectivity with nature and improving accessibility of natural areas in these Great Lakes Communities.”

Also at the conference, a number of important resolutions were passed by the membership. For further details, please go to www.glslcities.org/ajax.

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative is a coalition of more than 130 U.S. and Canadian cities and mayors representing over 17 million people committed to the long term protection and restoration of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence.

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Media Backgrounder

At its 2018 Annual Conference in Ajax, Ontario, the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative created a Mayors' Council on Nature and Communities (MCNC), chaired by Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie.

The Council's mandate is to:

- i. contribute to people's connection with nature within their own municipality;
- ii. contribute to the national CBD target of 17% protected land and freshwater;
- iii. contribute to the connectivity and biodiversity of habitat and migratory pathways specific to the Great Lakes St. Lawrence region.

i) Connecting Nature to Communities and Communities to Nature

- There is an increasing call for connecting people to nature in our towns and cities. Protected natural spaces serve a number of important functions. They can:
 - i. Support species and their habitat in urban setting and connecting to natural spaces adjacent to urban spaces;
 - ii. Promote people's regular access to nature, regardless of socio-economic background, which is particularly important for children's mental health;
 - iii. Strengthen resiliency to climate change, e.g. through their tree canopy and ability to absorb stormwater during heavy rainfall.
- Many of our member cities already have greening/ protected spaces strategies and natural heritage protection policies on which to build.
- *The Council will support further work in its member cities to preserve areas within the city and on the fringe of development that are identified as important habitat for certain species.*
- *The Council will encourage member mayors to reach out to residents, businesses and not for profits (land trusts, conservation authorities, utility companies, etc.) to encourage them to offer land or other resources towards securing and protecting these natural spaces.*

ii) Contributing to the national 17% CBD target

- Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) is leading the national effort to meet the International Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Target 11(the Aichi target): protection of 17% of land and inland freshwater. behind achieving the CBD target. See <https://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/rationale/target-11/>

- The 17% target will largely be achieved through the designation of lands and inland waters in the far north. However, there is interest in designating a small percentage in areas that are more visible to Canadians in the south, including marine conservation areas,
- *The Council will work with federal authorities and NGOs contributing to the national effort to identify and protect natural areas that contribute to the CBD 17% target.*

iii) Supporting connectivity and biodiversity in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence region

- While natural spaces within towns and cities are important in their own right, there is also interest in connecting these spaces to larger protected areas in the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence region, to support habitat and migratory pathways of species unique to the region. Connecting terrestrial and bird species to shorelines and nearshore habitat is particularly important.
- This connectivity could be achieved in a way that support both natural spaces in urban areas and protected spaces that contribute to the 17% national target.
- *The Council will prepare an inventory of natural spaces within and adjacent to its member municipalities. Working with conservation experts, the Council will help identify important spaces to contribute to connectivity in support of species and habitat in the Great Lakes St. Lawrence region.*