


**Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee
September 8, 2011**

TO: Chair and Members of Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee

SUBMITTED BY: 
Phillip Townsend, Director, Infrastructure and Asset Management

DATE: July 28, 2011

SUBJECT: Blue Flag Beach Candidacy

ORIGIN

- Information Report, February 1, 2011: Blue Flag Beaches
- Briefing Note, June 2, 2011: Blue Flag Beach
- 2011 / 2012 Corporate Plan

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Environment and Sustainability Standing Committee:

1. Forward a Report containing the originating Information Report and Briefing Note overviewing the Blue Flag program and the following recommended motion to Regional Council:

“That Halifax Regional Municipality declares its candidacy as a Blue Flag candidate community and is committed to endeavour to meet the outstanding criteria at Birch Cove Beach”;

2. Directs staff to work with Environmental Defence to assess whether the water quality results at Black Rock and Dingle/ Fleming Park Beaches meet Blue Flag criteria.

BACKGROUND

The International Blue Flag program began in Europe in 1985 and is administered by the Foundation for Environmental Education which is based in Denmark. The Blue Flag program certifies beaches against 32 criteria. In 2011, 2,650 Blue Flags were awarded to beaches and marinas around the world.

Environmental Defence is a national charitable organization committed to protecting the environment and human health and is the operator of Blue Flag Canada.

In June 2011, Environmental Defence attended Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) to conduct a feasibility study of achieving Blue Flag Beach status at Birch Cove Beach.

DISCUSSION

HRM's Birch Cove Beach was assessed against the International Blue Flag Beach Criteria, which are organized into four main categories:

1. Environmental Education and Information
2. Water Quality
3. Environmental Management
4. Safety and Services

Based on a review of the beach conducted with staff and Environmental Defence, HRM could move to the pilot phase for Blue Flag status for the remainder of the summer of 2011 if the following commitments are made to:

- Improve and promote educational activities provided at/for the beach;
- Promote greater awareness of the code of conduct and municipal By-laws of the beach.
- Provide adequate recycling facilities for beach users;
- Enhance water quality testing to the standard recommended in the Guidelines for Canadian Recreational Water Quality; and,
- Take at least four more water quality samples this summer (the last recorded for this report was June 21st).

Upon accepting the recommendations in this report, and committing to meeting the remaining criteria, HRM will be declared a Blue Flag candidate community. A beach can remain in the pilot phase for up to three years before its continued eligibility for the Blue Flag program is reassessed.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

The actions required to meet the outstanding criteria appear to have a one time value of around \$10,000 plus some in-house efforts. Staff would propose that this project meets the eligibility requirements of the Green Municipal Fund Sustainable Communities Reserve (Q127) and would

be charged to D948 Sustainable Community Projects at a cost of \$5,000 in this fiscal year and \$5,000 in next fiscal year.

In addition, enhancing the water monitoring frequency slightly would have a less than \$1,000 additional cost to the existing program (charged to D935 Sustainable Environment Management Office – 6399).

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Project and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Project and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A major element of Blue Flag Beach program is community involvement. Following the audit, HRM and Environmental Defence hosted a meeting for environmental NGO's that was well attended. There are other major community initiatives related to water quality happening in Halifax Regional Municipality, and the environmental NGO's have indicated their support for this initiative.

ALTERNATIVES

None identified.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment: Birch Cove Beach, Blue Flag Feasibility Study

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/commcoun/cc.html> then choose the appropriate Community Council and meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

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**HALIFAX REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY'S
BIRCH COVE BEACH
BLUE FLAG FEASIBILITY STUDY
JULY 2011**



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Executive Summary

The International Blue Flag program began in Europe in 1985 and is administered by the Foundation for Environmental Education which is based in Denmark. The Blue Flag program certifies beaches against 32 criteria. In 2011, 2,650 Blue Flags were awarded to beaches and marinas around the world.

Environmental Defence is a national charitable organization committed to protecting the environment and human health and is the operator of Blue Flag Canada.

HRM is well known as one of Canada's favourite maritime vacation destinations. HRM Regional Municipality (HRM) has agreed to proceed with a feasibility study for their municipal beach front at Birch Cove on Lake Banook and this report details the findings of that study.

HRM's Birch Cove Beach was assessed against the International Blue Flag Beach Criteria, which are organized into four main categories:

1. Environmental Education and Information
2. Water Quality
3. Environmental Management
4. Safety and Services

Based on a review of the beach conducted with Cameron Deacoff and other members of HRM staff, HRM could move to the pilot phase for Blue Flag status for the remainder of the summer of 2011 if the following commitments are made to:

- Improve and promote educational activities provided at/for the beach;
- Promote greater awareness of the code of conduct and municipal bylaws of the beach.
- Provide adequate recycling facilities for beach users;
- Enhance water quality testing to the standard recommended in the Guidelines for Canadian Recreational Water Quality; and,
- Take at least four more water quality samples this summer (the last recorded for this report was June 21st).

Upon accepting the recommendations in this report, and committing to meeting the remaining criteria, HRM will be declared a Blue Flag candidate community. A beach can remain in the pilot phase for up to three years before its continued eligibility for the Blue Flag program is reassessed.

Introduction

The Blue Flag Program is an internationally recognized eco-label that symbolizes clean and well managed beaches and marinas. The Program is owned and operated by the Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE) based in Denmark. In 2011, over 2,650 beaches in 36 different countries were awarded the Blue Flag. A Blue Flag is awarded annually based on a beach meeting the Blue Flag criteria in the prior year.

In addition to Blue Flag, FEE delivers a variety of environmental education programs through partnerships with national NGOs in over 60 countries worldwide, such as Eco-Schools, Young Reporters for the Environment, Learning about Forests (LEAF) and Green Key, an eco-certification program for hotels.

Environmental Defence is a registered charity and an associate member of FEE as the Canadian Operator of the Blue Flag Program. Environmental Defence is responsible for developing and administering the program. This includes conducting feasibility studies for potential Blue Flag beaches, administering the Canadian Jury, monitoring beaches that achieve Blue Flag status, developing strategic partnerships and promoting the benefits of achieving Blue Flag certification.

International Blue Flag Beach Criteria

A total of 33 criteria, one of which is not applicable to Canada, form the core of the International Blue Flag Program and they are divided into four categories:

1. Environmental Education and Information
2. Water Quality
3. Environmental Management
4. Safety and Services

The criteria are further divided into imperative and guideline criteria. To be awarded a Blue Flag a beach must fulfill all the imperative criteria. During the swimming season, if an awarded beach fails to meet an imperative criterion, the Blue Flag must be lowered until compliance has been re-established. Beach operators should strive to meet the guideline criteria, because they provide additional services and information to beach users. However, Blue Flags can still be awarded to beaches that do not meet any of the guideline criteria.

While good water quality is essential for a clean beach, the Blue Flag criteria under Environmental Education and Information, Environmental Management and Safety and Services lay out a broader framework for assessment. They examine the beach from a more holistic perspective and set standards to ensure that the beach ecosystem will be protected and that the use of the beach by the public will be managed in the most environmentally sensitive way. The public will seek out a Blue Flag beach for a number of reasons, such as, they are assured that the beach is clean and that their use of the beach will not harm the integrity of the beach ecosystem.

Assessment of HRM's Birch Cove Beach, June 2011

On June 29th and 30th, Environmental Defence conducted a feasibility study for Halifax Regional Municipality's (HRM) Birch Cove Beach on Lake Banook with Cameron Deacoff, Environmental Performance Officer for the Municipality. This is the first of HRM's beaches to be considered for Blue Flag candidacy, but HRM has stated that it is its intention to consider other municipal beaches for future seasons.

HRM's Birch Cove Beach was evaluated against the international Blue Flag Beach criteria by Aidan Grove-White, Water Programs Manager and Blue Flag Coordinator with Environmental Defence.

Most imperative criteria have been met, what follows are recommendations on how to meet those that remain.

Environmental Education and Information

Criterion #1: Information about the Blue Flag Program must be displayed

Issue:

There are no signs related to the Blue Flag program at HRM beaches.

Suggested Action:

The application for a feasibility study, submitted by Cameron Deacoff, noted that it is the intention of the municipality to display information about the Blue Flag program once it has confirmed it will join the community.

Upon joining the Blue Flag program HRM must provide a Blue Flag information board which:

- provides information about the Blue Flag program (satisfying criterion 1)
- provides information about water quality at the beach (further satisfying criterion 3)
- provides information about the local ecosystem and any sensitive or unique features (satisfying part of criterion 2 and criterion 4)
- provides a map and information about the services and facilities offered on the beach (satisfying criteria 5)

Note: Information Board template will be provided by Blue Flag Canada

Criterion #2: Environmental education activities must be offered and promoted to beach users.

Issue:

The feasibility study noted that five planned activities will be provided at a later date.

Suggested Action:

Blue Flag Canada supports partnerships with local not for profit organizations (NPOs) to deliver educational activities, including tours, talks and reading material. Upon meeting with some local groups, we recommend that the municipality formalize an arrangement with the local groups to deliver some of the programming on the beach. These programs could then be displayed at a sign on the beach, to promote these activities to beach users.

Criterion #3: Information about bathing water quality must be displayed.

Issue:

HRM does not post the most recent bathing water quality test results at the beach.

Suggested Action:

Upon joining the Blue Flag program HRM must provide a Blue Flag information board which:

- provides information about the Blue Flag program (satisfying criterion 1)
- provides information about water quality at the beach (further satisfying criterion 3)
- provides information about the local ecosystem and any sensitive or unique features (satisfying part of criterion 2 and criterion 4)
- provides a map and information about the services and facilities offered on the beach (satisfying criteria 5)

Note: Information Board template will be provided by Blue Flag Canada

Criterion #4: Is information relating to local ecosystems, natural sensitive areas, or environmental phenomena displayed?

Issue:

HRM does not display such information at the beach.

Suggested Action:

Upon joining the Blue Flag program HRM must provide a Blue Flag information board which:

- provides information about the Blue Flag program (satisfying criterion 1)
- provides information about water quality at the beach (further satisfying criterion 3)
- provides information about the local ecosystem and any sensitive or unique features (satisfying part of criterion 2 and criterion 4)
- provides a map and information about the services and facilities offered on the beach (satisfying criteria 5)

Note: Information Board template will be provided by Blue Flag Canada

A local environmental feature that may be of interest to beach users is the lagoon ecosystem, which also acts as a migratory bird stopping point that could attract “birders” in the off season.

Criterion #5: A map of the beach indicating different facilities must be displayed.

Issue:

HRM does have maps displaying different facilities available, but it does not have the proposed Blue Flag boundary areas included.

Suggested Action:

Upon joining the Blue Flag program HRM must provide a Blue Flag information board which:

- provides information about the Blue Flag program (satisfying criterion 1)
- provides information about water quality at the beach (further satisfying criterion 3)
- provides information about the local ecosystem and any sensitive or unique features (satisfying part of criterion 2 and criterion 4)
- provides a map and information about the services and facilities offered on the beach (satisfying criteria 5)

Note: Information Board template will be provided by Blue Flag Canada

Criterion #6: A code of conduct that reflects appropriate laws governing the use of the beach and surrounding areas must be displayed.

Issue:

HRM has a code of conduct posted at the beach, but has indicated that laws governing beach use are not easily available to the public upon request.

Suggested Action:

Cameron Deacoff has stated that relevant guidelines and policies will be made available online and in print upon request.

Water Quality

Criterion #7: The beach must fully comply with the water quality sampling and frequency requirements.

Issue:

Birch cove Beach has been tested at a single site for several years with excellent results (**Appendix B**).

A single sample site tested at this frequency meets the international Blue Flag standard but falls below the Federal Guidelines for Canadian Recreational Water Quality (GCRWQ) which states that “[m]ost bodies of water used for recreational purposes frequently lack homogeneity with respect to their microbiological properties, thus making multipoint sampling necessary... the sampling sites should include points of greatest bather activity as well as peripheral points subject to external fecal pollution” (page 62).

Suggested Action:

The municipality should work with the local public health authority to see that the beach is tested at three sites, as per the GCRWQ advice upon joining the program. Alternatively, the municipality may contract with an accredited water quality testing service and laboratory to conduct its own tests.

Previous year’s single sample sites will be sufficient for consideration for the international Blue Flag Award in 2012 (so long as a minimum of at least 20 samples total are taken in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 swim seasons, according to the report provided there have been 16) but upon joining the program all Canadian Blue Flag beaches must comply with the GCRWQ or their superseding provincial protocols where applicable.

If this enhanced water quality testing is commenced in the summer of 2011 and maintained for the duration of HRM’s participation in the Blue Flag program, Blue Flag Canada will regard HRM’s Birch Cove Beach as in compliance with criterion 7 and it may be considered for the Blue Flag Award as early as 2012.

Environmental Management

Criterion #17: Facilities for the separation of recyclable waste materials should be available at the beach.

Issue:

There were no recyclable waste receptacles on the beach.

Suggested Action:

It was noted that HRM has recently enhanced its waste diversion program, and providing recycling receptacles on the beach would augment the efforts of the municipality to promote its objectives in this regard.

To comply with this criterion, the municipality will need to provide adequate recycling receptacles on the beach. We recommend recycling bins at least with every litter bin, about every 100 metres on the beach, and at all major access points to the site.

The bins should be clearly differentiated from the litter bins with signage describing the benefits of recycling.

Criterion #25: A sustainable means of transportation should be promoted in the beach area.

Issue:

Sustainable transportation to the beach is available but not explicitly encouraged.

Suggested Action:

It was noted that HRM will promote sustainable transportation on signage, though it is recommended that urban beaches also ensure there are adequate bike locking facilities at beaches.

Safety and Services

Criterion #31 (Guideline): A supply of potable drinking water should be available at the beach.

Issue:

On its feasibility application, HRM indicates there is not a source of drinking water on the beach, though this criteria may be satisfied if the water fountain at the beach is functional.

Suggested Action:

There should be a potable water source at the beach, e.g. from a fountain, pipe, tap, etc. This source can be in the restroom/toilet block or on the beachfront but it must be protected from contamination by animals.

Conclusion

As this report demonstrates, HRM's Birch Cove Beach is already fairly close to meeting the Blue Flag criteria and being considered for the award for as early as 2012.

If HRM declares its intention to meet the remaining criteria, the beach will immediately be included in the Blue Flag community, listed on the www.BlueFlag.ca website and HRM can begin using Blue Flag materials to promote its candidacy locally and in its tourism advertising.

A beach may remain in the candidacy phase for up to three years without its suitability for remaining in the Blue Flag program being reassessed.

We genuinely hope HRM takes the final steps towards joining the Blue Flag community, and we look forward to working with the municipality to promote it as a safe, healthy and sustainable beach destination to be enjoyed by both residents and visitors from around the world.

Appendix A – HRM’s Birch Cove Beach water quality testing results

Birch Cove Beach Water Quality Results (E. coli)
2007-2010

2007		2008		2009 ²		2010		2011	
Sample Date	Results	Sample Date	Results	Sample Date	Results ¹	Sample Date	Results	Sample Date	Results
25-Jun-2007	13	23-Jun-2008	6	Aug 2-9, 2009	7 90	22-Jun-2010	36	21-Jun-2011	6
3-Jul-2007	155	02-Jul-08	65	Aug 9-15, 2009	5 70	July 7&8, 2010	260		
9-Jul-2007	43			Aug 16-22, 2009	NT 35	11-Jul-2010	11		
16-Jul-2007	17			Aug 23-29, 2009	11 120	19-Jul-2010	47		
23-Jul-2007	204					26-Jul-2010	44		
25-Jul-2007	42					4-Aug-2010	20		
30-Jul-2007	19					9-Aug-2010	4		
7-Aug-2007	20					15-Aug-2010	60		
13-Aug-2007	27					22-Aug-2010	10		
13-Aug-2007	99								
20-Aug-2007	Wrong test								
22-Aug-2007	26								
23-Aug-2007	19								

¹ Two locations were tested in 2009 ("BC1" & "BC2"). Results posted above are presented in this same order.

² Beach not operated during 2009 swimming season because it served as the staging area for the 2009 ICF World Canoe Championships.

NT: Not Tested

* Red Text indicates testing after Major Storm