

Committee Report

To:	Warden Matrosovs and Members of Grey County Council
Committee Date:	August 14, 2025
Subject / Report No:	PDR-CW-44-25
Title:	Paid Parking Options for the Rail Trail and County Forests
Prepared by:	Sarah Johnson
Reviewed by:	Scott Taylor
Lower Tier(s) Affected:	All municipalities in Grey County except the Town of Hanover

Recommendation

1. That report PDR-CW-44-25 be received; and
2. That no paid parking system for County-owned parking lots along the Rail Trail and County Forests be implemented at this time.

Executive Summary

Based on Council's direction, County staff have investigated options for paid parking at County-owned recreational properties i.e., along the Rail Trail and County Forests. This report provides a summary of the County's current recreational parking lots, as well as research on other recreational area parking strategies. Staff have also investigated equity and health impacts with the introduction of paid parking system for recreational uses.

Staff are not recommending a formal paid parking program be implemented at this time. Should Council wish to proceed with a membership program or voluntary 'pay what you can' approach to parking at the County's recreational properties, that can be considered. However, such systems may require more staff time and costs than the potential revenue which could be generated.

Background and Discussion

Between the Rail Trail and the County Forests, Grey currently has either a forest or portions of the Rail Trail in eight of the nine member municipalities (i.e., all except for the Town of Hanover). Although the County Forests and Rail Trail are widespread, the County owns and operates relatively few parking areas to serve these recreational amenities. Particularly for those parking areas which require snow clearing, the costs of maintaining these lots can be significant i.e., \$10,000 - \$25,000 per parking lot per year, depending on the location and the severity of the winter.

At the March 13, 2025 Committee of the Whole meeting, staff presented report PDR-PCD-18-25. A link to this report is in the Attachments section of this report. At the March 13, 2025 meeting, Committee passed the following resolution:

“That staff be directed to bring back a report prior to 2026 budget discussions containing options for parking revenue along Grey County trail systems.”

Currently there are four County Forest properties with areas that would be classified as having parking lots:

1. Harkaway,
2. Lily Oak,
3. Camp Oliver, and
4. Kolapore.

In addition to these forest parking areas, there are also two County parking lots along the Rail Trail:

5. Rockford (Grey Road 18), and
6. Markdale (Main Street).

There are also some parking lots which help serve County trails that are maintained by other organizations including trail user groups or conservation authorities. For example, the County co-funded a parking lot at the Massie County Forest in 2024, but that lot is on land owned and maintained by the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority (GSCA) which also owns a connected forest. The Glenelg-Nordic Ski Club maintains a parking lot on privately owned lands adjacent to the County Forest. Some municipalities also have municipal parking lots near the Rail Trail which get used for trail user parking, though not specifically designated as Rail Trail parking.

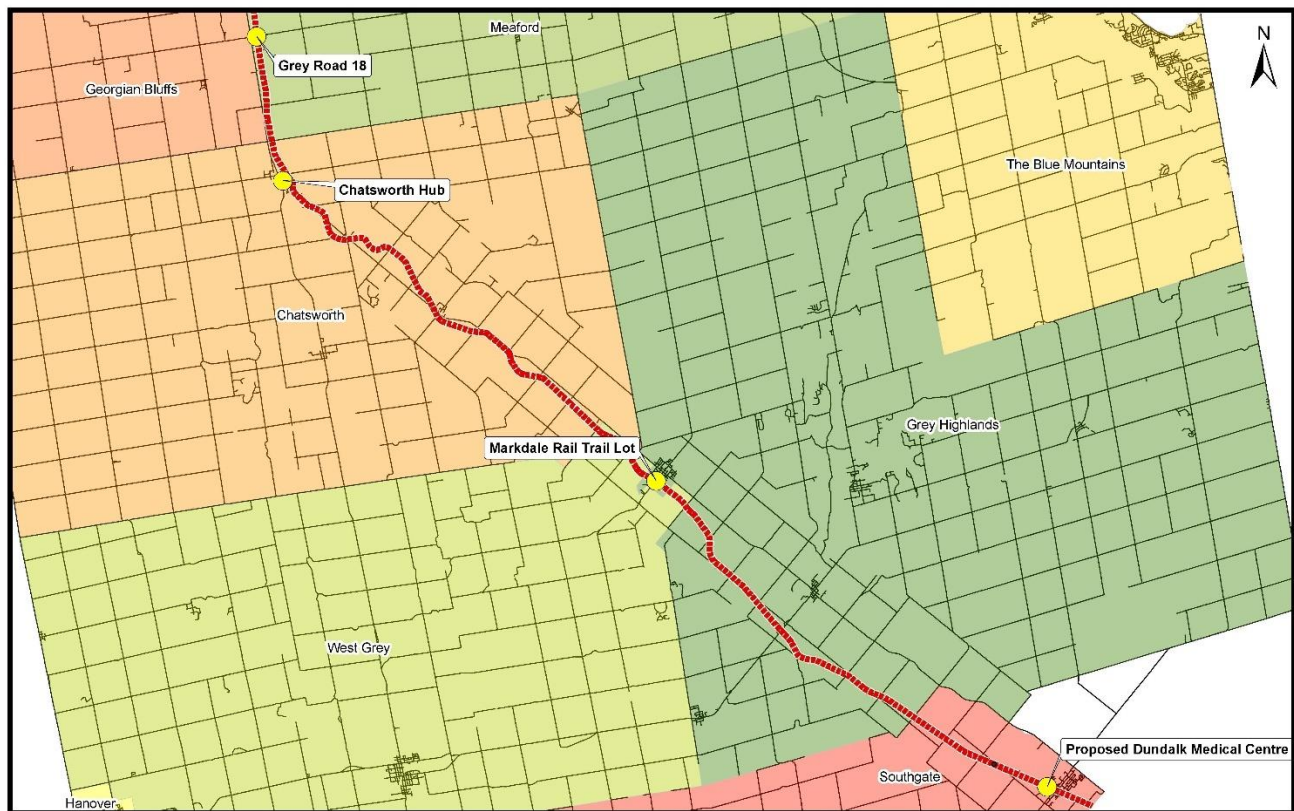
As part of the land transfer agreement with the Township of Southgate for the proposed medical clinic, there is also proposed to be a parking lot in Dundalk adjacent to the Rail Trail. This parking lot has not yet been constructed.

The Recreational Trails Master Plan (RTMP) promotes the establishment of parking opportunities for the Rail Trail and County Forests. It is silent on direction as it relates to implementing any kind of payment program, or funding mechanisms for such parking.

Map 1 below, shows the parking areas noted along the Rail Trail.

For the purposes of this report staff have only evaluated those properties where there are established parking areas:

- not on the roadside (e.g., on the shoulder),
- not simply the entrance to the Rail Trail or County Forest (e.g., a driveway with no identified parking),
- that can accommodate more than two vehicles, and
- that are owned and maintained by the County.



Map1: Parking Along the Rail Trail

Rail Trail Parking Lots

The Rail Trail permits hiking, cycling, equestrian, all-terrain vehicles (ATV), off-road motorcycles, and snowmobiles. For ATVs, off-road motorcycles, and snowmobiles, club membership is required in the respective ATV, off-road motorcycle, and snowmobile clubs.

Snowmobiles are permitted along the entire duration of the Rail Trail in winter months, while ATVs and off-road motorcycles are only permitted south of Rockford in non-winter months.

Rockford Parking Lot

The County constructed a gravel parking lot in 2023, which can accommodate 10+ vehicles. The lot is located on the south side of Grey Road 18, just east of Highway 6 & 10, in the Municipality of Meaford, as shown in Photo 1 below. This lot is the starting point (heading south) on the Rail Trail for both the Dufferin Grey ATV Club as well as the Ontario Federation of Trail Riders (OFTR) off-road motorcycles on the Rail Trail. The County's parking lot is currently not maintained in the winter months.



Photo 1 – Grey Road 18 Parking Lot

Markdale Parking Lot

Parking in Markdale is a gravel lot, which can accommodate 50+ vehicles. The lot is located on the south-east side of Grey Road 12 (Main Street West), in Markdale, in the Municipality of Grey Highlands (see photo 2 below). It was not maintained in the winter beginning in the winter of 2024/2025, but had been maintained by the County in winters prior via contract with a local plow operator. Although the ATV Club does not maintain the parking lot, they had paid to have a porta-potty at the lot during spring, summer, and fall, as part of their agreement with the County. Prior to its use for recreation purposes, it was used as overflow parking by Chapmans Ice Cream.

The County has also been investigating whether a portion of this land could be used for a future affordable housing build. Should the land be used for future housing, the intent would be to still try to maintain some of the lands for trail parking.



Photo 2 – Aerial Photo of Markdale Parking Lot

County Forest Parking Lots

Harkaway Parking Lot

This lot is very rudimentary and also used as a staging area when harvesting activities are occurring in the forest. Access to the lot is from the Euphrasia-Holland Townline, and the lot is in the Municipality of Grey Highlands (see photo 3 below). The lot is mainly a grass surface which can accommodate 10+ vehicles. This lot is not maintained in the winter and has not had any gravel added to the surface.

The property is included in the Dufferin Grey ATV Club trail system, and the property permits walking, ATV use, and snowmobile use in the winter months. Both ATV and snowmobile use require club membership/permits. Harkaway is the only County Forest which permits ATV usage.



Photo 3 – Aerial Photo of Harkaway Parking Lot

Camp Oliver Parking Lot

This parking lot is also very rudimentary with a grass/gravel surface. The lot is accessed from Southline in the Municipality of West Grey (see photos 4 and 5 below). This lot can accommodate 4-5 vehicles and is not maintained in the winter. It was originally a staging area for forest harvests. When upgrades to the forest property occurred in 2010, gravel was put down in the area. No additional improvements have been made since that time.

The property is included in the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) District 9 trail system. Camp Oliver also permits hiking, equestrian, snowshoeing and snowmobile (with membership/permit).

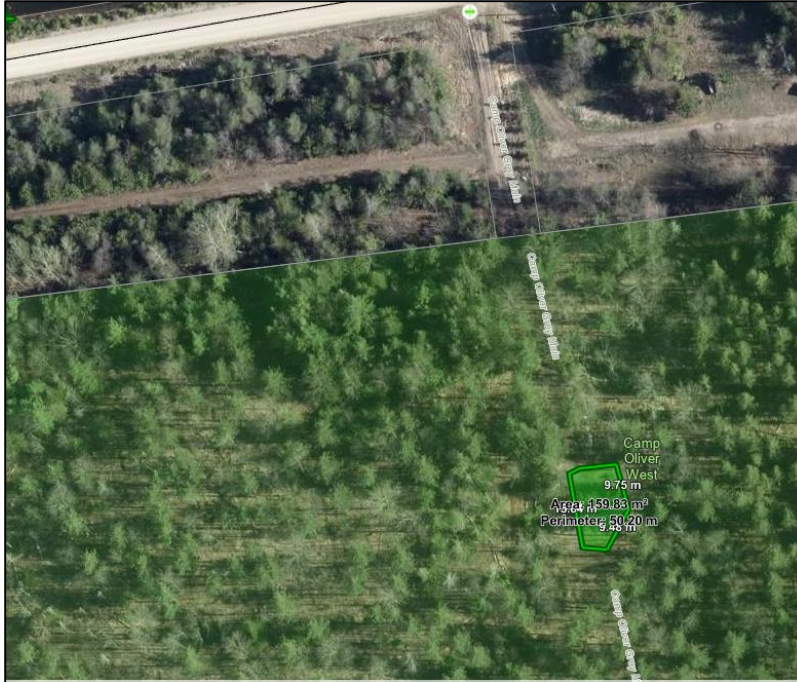


Photo 4 – Aerial Photo of Camp Oliver Parking Lot



Photo 5 – Camp Oliver Parking lot

Lily Oak Parking Lot

The Lily Oak lot is also a very rudimentary parking area with a gravel/grass surface. This lot is accessed from Concession 10, in the Township of Chatsworth (see photo 6 below). The lot can accommodate ~5 vehicles and is not maintained in the winter. It was originally a staging area and when upgrades to the forest property occurred in 2012, gravel was put down in the parking area. No additional improvements have been completed since this time.

The property permits hiking, equestrian, and snowshoeing. No motorized uses are permitted in Lily Oak.



Photo 6 – Aerial Photo of Lily Oak Parking Lot

Kolapore Parking Lot

This paved parking area was constructed in 2022 (improved from a previous gravel parking lot on-site). The parking is accessed from Osprey-The Blue Mountains Townline, on the west side of Grey Road 2 in the Town of The Blue Mountains (see photos 7 and 8 below). The lot can accommodate 23 vehicles. Previously it was used as a staging area for harvesting activities in the forest.

The property is included in the Kolapore Wilderness Trails system, and the property permits walking, biking, cross country skiing, and snowshoeing (in designated areas). No motorized uses are permitted in Kolapore.



Photo 7 – Aerial Photo of Kolapore Parking Lot



Photo 8 – Kolapore Parking Lot

Municipal and Conservation Authority Parking

In response to the direction from Council on March 13, 2025, staff researched options for potential paid parking, including looking at other municipal and conservation authority

approaches on recreational lands. A summary of some of the options being used locally has been included below. In looking at municipal options, staff generally did not evaluate downtown parking where parking meters or municipal parking lots may be used (except where the same system was used for downtown lots and recreational properties).

Neighbouring Counties

Staff confirmed with Bruce, Dufferin, and Simcoe that these counties do not charge for parking for any forest properties or rail trail parking areas.

Town of The Blue Mountains

To better manage public parking throughout the community, the Town implemented a paid parking program. All paid parking locations are clearly identified by signage. There are also free public parking lots throughout the community.

Council provided direction to establish a paid parking program for waterfront and recreational properties, but they did not want to charge residents who already pay property taxes to support the Town and its amenities. Additional parking revenue would help to offset the cost of visitors from tourism. Passes are obtained by registering license plates online or at Town Hall. Plates must be re-registered each year.

The Town uses a program called HonkMobile, which is an app that provides the ability to pay for parking online. All paid parking lots are clearly identified by signage. The program is enforced through the Town's by-law enforcement staff. A QR Code is scanned on the parking lot signs and it accesses the HonkMobile app. The main revenue generators in the program are the waterfront properties. The HonkMobile app charges a fixed monthly fee as well as a credit card processing fee.

Municipality of Meaford

At Memorial Park, Meaford has paid parking for non-residents. For residents, parking is free with proof of residency. Residents can fill out an online registration application to self-register or register in-person at the park office. For non-residents, the following parking rules are in effect.

- Paid parking is in effect from May 1 to October 31, between 10:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m.
- Fees: \$10 per day or \$100 for a season pass.
- Purchase passes using the Honk app or by scanning QR codes located throughout the park.

It is noteworthy that Memorial Park has a park office at the entrance to the park which distinguishes it from many other municipal parking areas, and from the County's recreational properties which have no such offices or controlled entry features.

City of Owen Sound

Owen Sound has camping at both Harrison Park and at Kelso Beach. Both sites have paid campsites which require bookings, but also have free parking spots for visitors and day users. Similar to Memorial Park in Meaford, both Harrison Park and Kelso Beach have a registration booth or hut at the entrance to the camping areas.

New in 2025, the City also has a paid parking fishing derby camping pass, which is required for camping in other designated areas of the City, but only applicable during the fishing derby in late August and early September.

Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority (SVCA)

In late 2022 SVCA began their membership program. The membership program gives day use access to all SVCA properties. The program charges \$5/day or \$55/year for a pass. This program replaced the MacKay Pay program that was discontinued because the company ceased operations. One of the reasons for a membership program over a parking program is that it changes the expectation for a certain level of service of an amenity (i.e., with paid parking comes a higher service expectation level).

SVCA currently does not use an app to manage their membership program. SVCA printed their own signage with QR codes to be installed at parking areas. Similar to Grey County properties, most SVCA recreational properties do not have a gate or registration booth at the entrance. According to SVCA staff, the program does not currently generate a lot of revenue, since the program began in fall 2022 and up until June of this year the total revenue has only been \$18,690 (an average of \$4,672.50 per year). SVCA does not have dedicated staff informing users of the requirement. This program is applicable to both residents and non-residents.

In the winter months SVCA maintains 3 parking areas.

Note: all three conservation authorities that staff spoke to had used MacKay Pay parking until it ceased operations in 2023. They have all since been using different programs to manage parking on their properties.

Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority (NVCA)

NVCA does not charge gate fees as they do not have the staffing for gate houses or resources to purchase automated gates. They do charge for parking at the conservation area parking lots, and the team does enforcement while doing other property checks and maintenance.

NVCA currently uses Hotspot, which is an app-based tool similar to HonkMobile app. The current rates are \$10/day or \$70/year. According to NVCA staff, they have been quite happy with the Hotspot services, as it has great reporting capabilities and customer service. Initially NVCA printed signage with fees listed. However NVCA has since been switching to QR codes to ensure the most recent fees are always used, without needing to update the signs every time the fees change.

In the winter months NVCA maintains 2 parking lots and a portion of one (6 cars) and 1 is plowed by contractor; last year they used 30% of revenue on snow removal.

Grey Sauble Conservation Authority (GSCA)

GSCA first began their program in 2015 with MacKay Pay, over the years they added properties to the list and increased their rates. For those properties with gates/booths, it was used when gate staff were not present. From 2015 – 2020, for properties where a gate staff was present, visitors would pay with cash or card, but cash is no longer accepted at any property. The 2025

rates for passes with GSCA are \$5/day or \$45 for a resident season pass, \$80 for a non-resident pass. Last year the estimated total revenue was \$320,000.

After MacKay Pay ceased operations, GSCA decided to do their own internal system using Square, which uses a fee per transaction. The fee per transaction varies depending on how the payment is made (i.e., using a card on site or using Apple Pay or Google Pay). GSCA created their own Square store on their website and created their own signage for parking. When a gate attendant is not present, a visitor scans a QR code that takes them to their site to make payment. If a gate attendant is present, they have a Square terminal to take payment by credit card right there. Square does require an internet connection to run. There are some properties that have service issues and therefore payments can't be made on phones and must be purchased in advance. The revenue from these programs covers the cost of the program, including the staffing, as well as generating revenue to put back into the budget. Compliance for the programs is 100% when staff are present on site, but staff are uncertain of compliance rates for sites without staff on-site.

Properties in this program include Inglis Falls, Bognor Marsh, Old Baldy, Hibou, Spirit Rock, Bruce Caves, Eugenia Falls, Ainslie Wood, and Christie Beach. A number of these sites have large visitor volumes, and in some cases gates / staff attendants on-site for portions of the year. For those higher traffic sites, they can generate significant parking revenue. From a comparison perspective, there isn't a GSCA property which is a directly akin example to Grey's recreational properties, but arguably Ainslie Wood would be the closest. However, Ainslie Wood has features beyond Grey's forests/trail properties. In addition to a gravel parking lot, Ainslie Wood has amenities including a vaulted privy, pavilion, and beach (no staff present on site). In 2024 the gross revenue was \$1,150.00 at the Ainslie Wood site.

GSCA maintains only their Administration building lot and the lot at Inglis Falls during the winter months. They have partnerships or agreements in place with clubs for some of the other GSCA properties for winter maintenance.

Grey Bruce Health Unit Research

In addition to the research above, County staff also reached out to the Health Unit regarding equity matters, and the potential impacts of a paid parking system on parking areas as it relates to physical health. Health unit staff provided the following comments regarding the impact of fees on public recreational spaces.

“Research considering the impact of entrance fees for [urban] green spaces highlights entrance fees as a barrier particularly for low-income populations. There is also some evidence to show that the impact of user fees for the use of public recreation can be mitigated by subsidizing recreation services for low-income households and other equity seeking groups such as seniors, immigrants and refugees. Finally, there is research that supports significant cost savings to the healthcare system resulting from the increase in physical activity that could result from equal access to greenspaces.”

Based on the above, the introduction of paid parking can be a barrier to public recreational areas, which serve to promote physical activity which is a cost savings to the healthcare system.

County staff would caveat the above comments by noting that some of the users in Grey seeking parking options are motorized vehicle users such as ATVs, snowmobiles, and off-road

motorcycles. The health benefits spoken to above by the Health Unit are referring more so to active transportation users such as walking, hiking, cycling, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing.

Considerations for Paid Parking at Grey County Recreational Properties

Of the County-owned parking lots profiled earlier in this report, should Council determine a paid program be established, staff would only recommend that the Markdale, Rockford, and Kolapore lots be considered for paid parking at this time. These three lots have been improved and can be maintained more easily than the other County lots profiled.

The Harkaway, Lily Oak, and Camp Oliver lots are very rudimentary and are not maintained beyond regular inspections and have not been maintained in winter months. The recreational features associated with these properties are limited to the forests and trails, with no other amenities provided beyond these small parking lots. The maintenance of these three lots is currently not at a level which should be considered as requiring payment for their use. Similar to the comments above in the SVCA section, with respect to an expectation of a higher level of service when paid parking is implemented, County staff do not believe these three lots would match that expectation.

Comparing the noted County-owned parking areas to the agencies and municipalities listed above isn't ideal as they are considerably different. The other parking areas often include additional amenities i.e., washrooms, pavilions, boardwalks, additional interpretative signage, etc. In many of the more visited conservation authority sites, they may also have additional natural features i.e., waterfalls, significant rock formations, waterfronts, etc. which attract more visitors and would justify the establishment of parking fees in these areas. The County properties listed above do not generally have additional amenities and as notable natural features. As such, the visitor numbers although undocumented, are significantly lower than many of the comparators evaluated above. Staff would further reiterate that the neighbouring counties profiled do not charge for their recreational property parking.

County staff are employing trail counters this summer to establish a baseline for use of these parking areas, but these counters will not distinguish between tourism-based visitors or local residents. Anecdotally, County staff believe many of the County Forest visitors will be Grey County residents. On the Rail Trail, staff believe the trail is still heavily used by residents, but that some cyclists, equestrian riders, ATVers, snowmobilers, and off-road motorcyclists may travel from outside the area.

As per the above-noted research, some areas charged separate resident vs. non-resident fees (or parking was free for residents). Should Council direct the implementation of a paid system, staff would also need to understand if the intent was for residents to be required to pay for access, or just those visiting as this could impact revenue significantly. If paid parking is to be implemented at certain locations on County properties, there are some items that should be considered:

1. Should there be a discounted rate/no fee for residents of Grey?
2. If there is a discount rate or no fee for residents, there would need to be some administration for residents to register for their discount (most likely on-line).

3. If no discount rate, should there be a rebate program for those with lower incomes, so that this fee doesn't become a barrier for recreation and overall health?
4. Should the paid parking fees be applied annually or just during the winter months?
5. The introduction of a program may create a need for additional staff to monitor / enforce the sites for compliance.
6. Would a program of this nature sustain itself or provide meaningful revenue at this time?

Based on the research completed, staff do not believe there are sufficient amenities, natural features, and estimated tourism traffic at these locations to implement a program for parking at this time. The cost of setting up the system, as well as monitoring or enforcement, is likely to exceed any revenue generated from the system. As the sites are monitored it could be revisited in the future, however, it does not seem appropriate at this time to introduce paid parking.

Other Potential Options for Parking Revenue

Should Council not opt to pursue a formal paid parking system, there are two other options which could be explored.

1. Implement a membership program like SVCA, or
2. Implement a voluntary 'pay what you can' parking system.

Option # 1 would be very similar to what SVCA currently has. While staff are supportive of this option in principle, it is questionable as to whether the County properties currently have the level of visitors and amenities needed to incentivize someone to sign up for an annual membership. There are costs and staff time associated with administering such a membership program and updating signage.

Based on the above, option # 2 may be preferable in this regard. Under this option, payment would be strictly voluntary and could include either a suggested parking amount (e.g. \$5.00), or a pay what you can type approach. County staff could add signage to those County properties with parking, which would include a QR code whereby someone could choose to pay as they see fit, but would not be required to do so. While revenues may not be the same as an enforced user pay system, this system would use less staff time/resources, beyond the initial signage and web set-up. The other benefit would be that it wouldn't be exclusionary to users with less financial means. A model such as this is not without precedent and has been used by some museums or galleries as an 'entry fee'. There would be costs associated with this model to (a) update the signage, and (b) process the payments (i.e., a transaction cost for each payment processed).

Staff are not recommending a formal paid parking system, a membership program, or voluntary 'pay what you can' parking system be implemented at this time. With respect to the membership program, or voluntary 'pay what you can' parking system, should Council support either of these options, County staff will monitor revenues and report back to Council. Depending on revenue levels, and trail user rates, it may be worth re-investigating paid parking options at a later date. Of these two options, the voluntary 'pay what you can' parking system is preferable to the membership program.

Legislated Requirements

Section 11(3)8 of the *Municipal Act* authorizes municipalities to pass by-laws respecting parking, except on highways.

Section 391 of the *Municipal Act* provides municipalities with the ability to pass by-laws imposing fees or charges. Should the County seek to implement paid parking, an update would be needed to the Fees and Service Charges By-law.

Financial and Resource Implications

Should Council direct, there will be a cost to implement and administer a paid parking system (required or voluntary) or a membership program. In a required payment system, there could also be the need for additional staff to help manage the locations for compliance. Staff support will be required from various departments to create a model that would work to receive the funds. This includes the creation and production of signage (estimated cost of one sign and post is \$133 + installation costs), a web-based platform, finance approved payment system, and ongoing monitoring of these aspects. As noted above, staff believe that the implementation and administration costs could be more than the potential parking revenue generated.

There are very few online payment models within Grey. Currently direct payments made by individuals to Finance are not received online, only payment via card (in person or over the phone), cash or cheque are accepted. Organizations the County does business with can register for Electronic Funds Transfer.

Some departments like Housing and Long-Term Care have their own platforms for receiving rent payments online. Grey Roots has a voluntary online donation option that is run using Stripe as the payment processor and it is integrated into Drupal Webforms. The fee structure for Stripe is 2.9% + \$0.30 per successful transaction for domestic cards. The same model is also used in Planning to accept payment for Natural Heritage Review fees.

Depending on the direction of Council there will be a need to work with staff in various departments to create and use a model that is feasible for the current staff complement as well as within the budget.

Relevant Consultation

- ☒ Internal: Legal Services, Finance, Information Technology, Grey County Forest Manager, Grey Roots
- ☒ External: Bruce County, Dufferin County, Simcoe County, Town of The Blue Mountains, Municipality of Meaford, City of Owen Sound, Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority, Nottawasaga Valley Conservation Authority, Grey Bruce Public Health

Appendices and Attachments

[Rail Trail Parking Options - PDR-CW-18-25.pdf](#)