



Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula Council Report

Report Number: CAO 25-21

Subject: Cabot Head Road – Draft Operational Plan and Communication & Engagement Plan

From: Peggy Van Mierlo-West, CAO

Date: November 24, 2025

Recommendation

It is recommended that Council receive Report CAO 25-21 Cabot Head Road – Draft Operational Plan and Communication & Engagement Plan as information; and,

That Council approve the Communication & Engagement Plan for immediate implementation; and further, that Council endorses the Draft Operational Plan as a conceptual framework only, with the understanding that it will be refined following the completion of public, stakeholder, and partner engagement.

Background

Cabot Head Road has remained closed to public vehicular access since storm events in 2019–2020 caused substantial washouts and damage along several sections of the corridor. Over the past several years, Council has received numerous reports outlining the legal, environmental, operational, and financial considerations required to either reconstruct the road, maintain the current closure, or undertake alternative approaches. In 2025, Council directed staff to prepare a draft operational model based on a combined approach involving elements of Option 2, which allows controlled vehicular access for authorized users, and Option 3, which would convert the road into a non-motorized multi-use trail for the public. Council further directed staff to design a comprehensive engagement process to gather public and partner feedback on this proposed model before making any final decisions.

Discussion

Staff have developed the Draft Operational Plan to demonstrate, in clear and detailed terms, how a combined Option 2 and Option 3 model would operate on a day-to-day and seasonal basis. Under this approach, Cabot Head Road would function with two distinct but complementary access systems. Authorized users—including the Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory, the Friends of Cabot Head Lighthouse, contractors, municipal operations staff, and emergency services—would be granted controlled vehicular access through a gated entry system. This system may include a keyed, coded, or electronic fob device, monitored access logs, emergency override features, and clear signage. Only light municipal vehicles, authorized trucks, or approved UTV/ATV units would be permitted, and all authorized users would be required to sign access agreements detailing liability, insurance, and operational expectations.

The public would access Cabot Head through a non-motorized multi-use trail created along the existing road alignment. This trail would provide an accessible and environmentally responsible means of visiting the lighthouse and surrounding lands, offering opportunities for hiking, cycling, birdwatching, and nature appreciation. The trail would include wayfinding signage, interpretive features, safety information, rest areas where appropriate, and seasonal closures during hazardous conditions. Routine inspections, hazard signage, and erosion monitoring would form part of the ongoing maintenance schedule.

The Draft Operational Plan also establishes clear municipal responsibilities for gate maintenance, trail grading, vegetation management, and enforcement, as well as partner responsibilities through operating agreements with BPBO, Friends of Cabot Head, and relevant federal and provincial agencies. Enforcement mechanisms such as trespass fines, signage, and periodic patrols will support compliance. A detailed seasonal operating model is included, outlining expectations for spring, summer, fall, and winter activity.

The Communication & Engagement Plan sets out a transparent and inclusive process to obtain feedback from residents, partner agencies, adjacent property owners, environmental organizations, tourism operators, and other stakeholders. Engagement will begin in January 2026 and will include the launch of a Let's Talk NBP project page, a comprehensive public survey, a Public Information Centre, a virtual open house, direct outreach to agencies, and multiple channels of communication such as social media, municipal website updates, media releases, and email distribution. All feedback will be analyzed and presented in a "What We Heard Report," which will then be used to refine the operational plan for Council's consideration in April 2026.

Staff emphasize that the Draft Operational Plan is conceptual and intended to support informed discussion. Endorsement at this stage does not constitute approval of implementation. It simply establishes a preliminary model for the purpose of engagement.

Financial Implications

There is no immediate capital expenditures associated with this report. The public engagement process will be completed using existing staff resources. Preliminary capital cost estimates for the proposed operational model, referenced previously in Report CAO 25-19, include approximately \$150,000 to \$300,000 for controlled access repairs and \$50,000 to \$100,000 for trail conversion. These figures will be refined following public and partner input, environmental review, and updated engineering assessment. No funding allocation is requested at this time.

Attachments:

- Cabot Head Operational Plan
- Cabot Head Communication Plan

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peggy Van Mierlo-West". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Peggy" being more prominent and the last name "Van Mierlo-West" following in a similar style.

Peggy Van Mierlo-West
Chief Administrative Officer



CABOT HEAD ROAD – PROPOSED OPERATIONAL PLAN

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1. Purpose of the Operational Plan

The purpose of this Operational Plan is to define how the combined Option 2 and Option 3 model for Cabot Head Road would function in practice. Under this model, vehicular access would be provided only to authorized users through a controlled access system, while the general public would access Cabot Head via a non-motorized multi-use trail. This plan outlines the operational requirements, maintenance expectations, safety measures, compliance mechanisms, and seasonal considerations needed to support sustainable long-term use of the corridor.

2. Combined Operating Model

Under the combined model, Cabot Head Road will operate under two distinct but complementary access systems. First, managed vehicular access will be available only to a defined group of authorized users. Second, public use will occur through a designated, non-motorized multi-use trail created along the former road alignment. The Municipality will maintain both the controlled access system and the trail infrastructure, ensuring safe and sustainable use of the corridor.

3. Operational Components

3.1 Controlled Vehicular Access (Authorized Users Only)

A managed access system will be established through the installation of a controlled entry point located near the current road closure. Authorized users will include the Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory (BPBO), the Friends of Cabot Head Lighthouse, approved contractors, municipal operations staff, emergency services, and any additional users as approved through a municipal permitting process.

The controlled access system will operate using a locked gate. The Municipality may select a physical key system, coded keypad, or electronic fob, depending on cost, reliability, and security needs. “Authorized Access Only” signage will be posted at the access point. If required, a surveillance camera may be installed to monitor entry. The

gate system must also include an emergency override for fire, EMS, and police access. Electronic systems should log all entries and exits to ensure accountability.

Only specific vehicle types will be permitted. These will include municipal service vehicles, light trucks, and approved UTV/ATV units. Public vehicles, buses, and other high-impact traffic will be prohibited.

The Municipality will administer long-term operational permits for BPBO and Friends of Cabot Head and will issue short-term permits for contractors or seasonal maintenance activities. All authorized users must sign an access agreement outlining their responsibilities, including liability coverage, compliance with environmental protocols, and adherence to designated routes or restrictions.

3.2 Public Multi-Use Trail Operations

Public access to Cabot Head will be provided through a non-motorized multi-use trail constructed along the former roadway alignment. The trail will feature a compacted natural surface or crushed gravel designed for safe walking, hiking, and cycling.

A trailhead kiosk will be installed at the access point and will include maps, route information, distances, safety messaging, and ecological protection reminders. Wayfinding and interpretive signage will be installed along the trail to guide visitors and provide educational opportunities related to natural and cultural features. Resting areas or benches may be placed along the route where appropriate.

Permitted uses will include walking, hiking, cycling, birdwatching, and nature photography. Motorized public vehicles will not be allowed on the trail. Seasonal closures may be implemented during high-risk conditions such as severe weather, flooding, or shoreline instability. Leash restrictions for dogs may be required in proximity to sensitive environmental zones.

Safety measures will include routine trail inspection, hazard signage in erosion-prone areas, and temporary closures during storms or flooding. Staff will monitor trail conditions regularly and document maintenance requirements.

4. Maintenance and Management Framework

4.1 Municipal Responsibilities

The Municipality will maintain the gate system, monitor access logs as applicable, and conduct regular inspections of the controlled access point. Municipal responsibilities will include trail grading, trimming, and drainage maintenance, as well as erosion tracking along sensitive shoreline sections. Staff will maintain and update the list of authorized permit holders and conduct annual or seasonal safety inspections. Enforcement of

municipal by-laws related to unauthorized access, trespassing, or environmental damage will fall under the municipality's enforcement division.

4.2 Partner Responsibilities

Partner agencies will support operations through formal agreements. The BPBO will manage maintenance of its facilities and coordinate research access scheduling. The Friends of Cabot Head will maintain heritage buildings and seasonal operations related to the lighthouse precinct. Provincial and federal agencies—Ontario Parks, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry—will provide environmental permitting, technical guidance, and regulatory oversight as required. Continuous communication between partners will support coordinated operations, ecological protection, and timely issue resolution.

5. Compliance and Enforcement Protocols

Compliance measures will be essential to protect the corridor from unauthorized vehicle use and environmental degradation. Enforcement tools will include trespass fines, review of gate access logs, and routine municipal patrols. Public education through signage, online communication, and interpretive materials will help deter misuse. During peak visitation periods, seasonal enforcement blitzes may be undertaken. The Municipality may also consider drone monitoring or contracted patrol services if compliance challenges arise.

6. Seasonal Operational Model

Spring (April–June): The public trail will reopen, and controlled vehicular access for authorized users will resume following winter closure. Initial grading and clearing of winter debris will occur.

Summer (July–September): This is the period of highest public visitation. Trail maintenance and monitoring will increase accordingly. Research and heritage operations will be most active during this time.

Fall (October–November): Trail use will decrease. Staff will monitor erosion-prone areas and prepare the corridor for winter conditions.

Winter (December–March): The trail may be closed fully or opened for passive winter uses such as snowshoeing, depending on weather and safety. Vehicular access will generally be restricted to emergency or specifically approved winter operations.

7. Benefits of the Combined Operational Model

The combined approach provides significant environmental protection by reducing vehicular pressure on sensitive shoreline and wetland areas while maintaining essential access for research and heritage organizations. It avoids the high capital costs associated with full reconstruction while enabling a high-quality recreational experience through the multi-use trail. The model supports a feasible operational framework that balances public expectations, organizational access needs, environmental stewardship, and municipal fiscal responsibility.

8. Financial Implications

Financial impacts align with the preliminary estimates contained in CAO 25-19. Controlled access repairs are expected to cost approximately \$150,000 to \$300,000, while trail conversion costs range from \$50,000 to \$100,000. These costs will be refined through partner consultation, environmental analysis, and updated engineering review.

9. Implementation Steps

The following actions will support implementation of the operational model:

1. Conduct full public engagement from January to April 2026.
2. Obtain formal feedback from partner agencies and authorized-user groups.
3. Finalize operational design elements (gate location, trail alignment, signage).
4. Refine financial estimates based on engineering and environmental input.
5. Prepare and present a final report to Council in April 2026 with recommended next steps.



Communication & Engagement Plan

Cabot Head Road

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Purpose of the Communication & Engagement Plan

The purpose of this plan is to outline a structured, transparent, and comprehensive communication and engagement process to gather public, partner, and stakeholder input on the Draft Operational Plan for Cabot Head Road, which combines elements of controlled vehicular access (Option 2) and non-motorized public access via a multi-use trail (Option 3).

This engagement process is intended to:

- Validate the proposed operational model,
- Identify improvements or community concerns,
- Ensure regulatory partners provide required technical input, and
- Support Council in making an informed decision based on community-informed evidence.

Engagement Objectives

The engagement process aims to achieve the following:

Awareness: Ensure the community has access to clear, accurate information about the Draft Operational Plan.

Understanding: Provide accessible explanations, visuals, and examples that allow residents to evaluate the feasibility and implications of the combined access model.

Input Collection: Capture a wide range of perspectives, suggestions, operational insights, local knowledge, and concerns.

Transparency: Demonstrate an open and structured engagement process with timely updates and clear reporting.

Collaboration: Work with federal and provincial partners, environmental agencies, research organizations, and adjacent landowners.

Improvement: Use feedback to refine, strengthen, or adjust the operational plan before presenting the final version to Council.

Engagement Principles

This engagement strategy is guided by the following principles:

Inclusivity: All affected or interested groups must have meaningful access to information and opportunities to participate.

Clarity: Information must be easy to understand and presented in plain language.

Transparency: All input is recorded, considered, and reported publicly.

Balance: Engagement materials present the benefits, constraints, and implications objectively.

Respect: The process recognizes Indigenous rights, environmental protections, and community heritage.

Key Audiences

Primary Audiences

- General public (municipal residents and visitors)
- Adjacent property owners
- Dyers Bay area residents and seasonal occupants
- Agencies

Secondary Audiences

- Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory
- Friends of Cabot Head Lighthouse
- Tourism operators
- Environmental organizations

Regulatory/Agency Partners

- Fisheries and Oceans Canada
- Parks Canada
- Ontario Parks
- Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry

Engagement Activities

Engagement activities will be structured into four categories: Information, Consultation, Discussion, and Feedback Integration.

Information Dissemination

Let's Talk NBP Project Page (Primary Information Hub)

The page will include:

- Draft Operational Plan (full document and summary)
 - Background materials (maps, images, history, previous reports)
 - A plain-language description of the combined option model
 - Visual diagrams showing gate system, trail alignment, seasonal operations
 - Environmental and legal context
 - Frequently Asked Questions
 - Engagement timeline
 - Link to the public survey
 - Municipal Website & News Section
- Short summary and link to Let's Talk NBP.

Social Media Campaign

Three-phase posting strategy (launch, mid-point, last call).

Media Release

Distributed to local newspapers and radio outlets to ensure broader awareness.

Public Consultation Activities

Public Survey

Survey questions will be designed to evaluate:

- Support level for controlled access
- Comfort with trail-based public access
- Concerns about safety, enforcement, or environmental impacts
- Preferences for trail design, signage, and seasonal closures
- Views on gate systems and vehicular screening
- Suggestions for operational improvements

Staff available for Q&A

- Comment sheets
- Video presentation posted online summarizing the draft plan with narration and visuals.

Targeted Partner and Stakeholder Engagement

Formal Letters Requesting Input

Sent to federal/provincial agencies and key partners.

Feedback Integration

All input from public survey, PIC, partner meetings, and online submissions will be recorded and analyzed.

Activities include:

- Theme analysis
- Environmental risk scanning
- Operational feasibility review
- Cost implications review
- Identification of contradictory or consensus input

This analysis will feed into the “What We Heard Report.”

Engagement Timeline

December 2025	• Finalize draft operational plan materials • Prepare engagement materials • Issue partner agency letters
January 2026	• Launch of Let's Talk NBP project page • Release operational plan summary • Launch social media campaign (Post #1) • Issue email blast • Open public survey
February 2026	• Conduct virtual open house • Hold partner meetings • Social media Post #2 (mid-survey reminder)
March 1 st , 2026	• Survey closes • Social media Post #3 (closing reminder)
March 2026	• Draft "What We Heard Report" • Refine operational plan based on input • April 2026 • Present revised operational plan and "What We Heard Report" to Council

Measures of Success

Success of the engagement will be measured by:

- Number of survey responses
- Attendance at PIC and virtual sessions
- Diversity of input (geographic, stakeholder group, partner agencies)
- Quality and clarity of public commentary
- Evidence of community understanding
- Degree to which the engagement informs improvements to the operational plan
- Partner agency alignment and clarity on approvals

Risks and Mitigation Strategies

Risk: Misinterpretation of the term “closure.”

Mitigation: Clear messaging that the public will still access via trail.

Risk: Stakeholder conflict between public access and environmental protection.

Mitigation: Balanced materials, FAQ sheets, environmental rationale explanations.

Risk: Low survey participation.

Mitigation: Multi-channel outreach and reminders.

Risk: Regulatory delays.

Mitigation: Early engagement with federal agencies.

Reporting Back

A What We Heard Report will summarize all public and stakeholder feedback.

It will include:

- Survey data
- Written submissions
- Themes and concerns
- Operational improvements suggested by the public
- Partner agency positions
- Summary of modifications made to the draft operational plan
- This report will be released publicly and provided to Council for consideration.