

**Municipality of Chatham-Kent**

**Community Development**

**Planning Services**

**To:** Mayor and Members of Council

**From:** Ryan Jacques, MCIP, RPP  
Director, Planning Services

**Date:** June 9, 2022

**Subject:** Uncle Tom's Road Name Change to Freedom Road

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**Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

1. In support of the Ontario Heritage Trust's efforts to further combat anti-Black racism, Uncle Tom's Road be renamed Freedom Road effective July 25, 2022, and that the road naming by-law, attached as Appendix A, be approved.
2. Administration notify affected property owners of the road name change by mail and the general public by local media advertisements; and that Planning Services engage with the neighbours, as appropriate, to assist with the change.

**Background**

Uncle Tom's Road is a local rural road, located southwest of Dresden. Along this road is the property containing Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site. This site was part of 81 hectares (200 acres) of land purchased in 1841 to establish the Dawn Settlement – a refuge for the many fugitives from slavery who escaped to Canada from the United States. The Josiah Henson Interpretive Centre, located on the site, houses a collection of 19th-century artifacts and rare books pertinent to the abolitionist era, as well as displays highlighting Reverend Josiah Henson's life.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is maintained for the public by the Ontario Heritage Trust, an agency of the Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries. The Trust has a province-wide mandate to conserve, interpret and share Ontario's heritage. The Trust acts as a centre of expertise, and serves as the heritage trustee and steward for the people of Ontario. It conserves provincially significant cultural and natural, tangible and intangible heritage, interprets Ontario's history, celebrates its diversity, and educates Ontarians of its importance in our society.

Earlier this spring, the Trust requested that Chatham-Kent rename Uncle Tom's Road to Freedom Road.

There are 17 rural and farm properties fronting this road, seven (7) residences of which have an Uncle Tom's Road 911 number.

### **Comments**

Over many years, the Ontario Heritage Trust has worked with the municipality and Black history sites in the area to showcase Ontario's Black history and promote tourism in the region. Though this work, the Trust has made a significant commitment to anti-Black racism education and inclusive programming.

As identified by the Trust, new opportunities exist to address issues of racism and biases reflected in the term 'Uncle Tom'. As the collective understanding of the Black presence in Ontario continues to evolve, the Trust is able to interpret the story in a more respectful and sensitive manner.

The term 'Uncle Tom' embodies many of the prejudices and biases at the root of anti-Black racism. Today, as a result of the popularity of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century minstrel shows that distorted the character of Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 anti-slavery novel, the term implies a person of African descent is a traitor to their race, and as such the phrase is perceived as derogatory and harmful to many within the Black community. Through interpretation, the Trust has endeavored to correct the myth regarding 'Uncle Tom' and reestablish the connection of the novel to the anti-slavery movement. The Trust, however, concluded that to continue to use 'Uncle Tom' in association with Josiah Henson does a disservice to honoring his inspiring and instructive legacy.

By renaming of the road where the Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site exists, the Trust (and the Municipality) is better positioned to further combat anti-Black racism and elevate the story of the Black presence in this part of the province while reaching a wider audience.

The purpose of implementing the road name change on July 25, 2022 is that this is the last week of business prior to Emancipation Day, which is on August 1, 2022. Emancipation Day is being celebrated at Uncle Tom's Cabin on Saturday, July 30, 2022. It is anticipated that road signage will be changed out during this week in advance of local celebrations.

### **Impact to Neighbours**

Changing the name of Uncle Tom's Road to Freedom Road has an impact on neighbour and property owners on the road. Similar to when someone's address changes when they move, a road name change will initiate a change of a person's documents and accounts where their address is included. While there are likely to be some fees for certain changes required, fees are generally low if there are any at all. It is recognized that it is the inconvenience of the change that is most impactful. It requires

a lot of time to arrange these changes across the many personal accounts someone may hold. This impact to the public is one reason that road names are rarely changed.

Through implementation, Chatham-Kent will engage neighbours and assist as appropriate. Representatives of Uncle Tom's Cabin have met with several property owners over the past few months regarding this proposal, so this change is somewhat anticipated, however not necessarily by all property owners along the road.

### Corporate Issues

#### *Road Name Change Policy*

Council has adopted a road name change policy outlining the process of road name changes. This policy outlines the criteria in which individuals must meet and/or obtain for a road name change to be eligible for consideration. Requests received from residents. The policy is attached as Appendix B.

The recommendations in this report deviate from the policy. The main policy provisions not followed in this recommendation is the requirement for 100% of affected property owners to agree to the change, and that a \$1,500 application fee apply. When this policy was implemented, its intent was to manage periodic public requests for road name changes, and provide a consistent process to follow. This policy did not contemplate a request like this for Uncle Tom's Road. Given that the initiating property owner is the Ontario Heritage Trust, a Provincial agency, and for the reason outlined in this report. It is recommended Council proceed with the change as presented. However, for road name changes of a general nature, the road name change policy continue to apply.

#### *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice*

Chatham-Kent is committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. To this commitment, there is a need to review and integrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice into Municipal strategies, plans, policies, and processes. This involves working to review and update policies and processes with a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens. While the road name change policy has not been specifically reviewed recently through this lens, it does set out that *road names shall not be profane, derogatory, cumbersome, corrupted, modified or discriminatory names, from the point of view of race, sex, colour, creed, political affiliation, religion or other social factors of this nature*. The recommendations in this report support Chatham-Kent's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

#### *Signage*

Public Works will arrange for the necessary road sign changes in late-July. These signs are located at the intersections of Base Line, Park Street, and Glasgow Line.

### **Areas of Strategic Focus and Critical Success Factors**

The recommendations in this report support the following areas of strategic focus:

- ☐ Economic Prosperity:  
Chatham-Kent is an innovative and thriving community with a diversified economy
- ☐ A Healthy and Safe Community:  
Chatham-Kent is a healthy and safe community with sustainable population growth
- ☒ People and Culture:  
Chatham-Kent is recognized as a culturally vibrant, dynamic, and creative community
- ☐ Environmental Sustainability:  
Chatham-Kent is a community that is environmentally sustainable and promotes stewardship of our natural resources

The recommendations in this report support the following critical success factors:

- ☐ Financial Sustainability:  
The Corporation of the Municipality of Chatham-Kent is financially sustainable
- ☒ Open, Transparent and Effective Governance:  
  
The Corporation of the Municipality of Chatham-Kent is open, transparent and effectively governed with efficient and bold, visionary leadership
- ☐ Has the potential to support all areas of strategic focus & critical success factors
- ☐ Neutral issues (does not support negatively or positively)

### **Consultation**

The following departments were consulted on the recommendations:

#### **Finance, Budget, Information Technology & Transformation**

Financial Services supports the recommendation, and advised on the road name change policy. Note: The road name change policy now sits with Community Development, Planning Services, upon the date of this report.

#### **Corporate Services**

Human Resources & Organizational Development supports the recommendations, and has informed regarding the diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice strategy.

#### **Infrastructure & Engineering Services**

Public Works supports the recommendation, and will initiate signage updates at the appropriate time.

**Financial Implications**

There are negligible costs related to replacement of road signs and advertising.

Prepared by Ryan Jacques, MCIP, RPP, Director, Planning Services,

Reviewed by Bruce McAllister, MCIP, RPP, General Manager, Community Development

Attachments: Appendix A – By-law to Rename a Certain Street (Uncle Tom's Road)

Appendix B – Road Name Change Policy