

Niagara Parks Police Service: Unique in Ontario

By Lauren Alpern

The many police services across Ontario have a lot in common, as far as how they're run and the issues they face. Perhaps the only exception is the Niagara Parks Police Service (NPPS), which technically doesn't have any sworn police officers and operates under the Niagara Parks Commission, an agency of the Province of Ontario.

"In Ontario, policing services are delivered by the OPP or a municipal police services board," said Niagara Parks Police Association President Adam Kitson. "Our employer; however, is the Niagara Parks Commission, and not a municipality. The Regional Municipality of Niagara Police Services Board maintains jurisdiction for policing and appoint our members as Special Constables. Despite having much of the same powers and authorities as sworn police officers, we can't be classified as such under the Police Services Act."

Established in 1887, the NPPS is one of the oldest police services in Ontario – even older than the OPP, which was established in 1909. The service was originally made up of a Head Policeman, who earned \$2.50 per day, and a regular policeman, who earned \$2 per day. On top of their pay, they both received two uni-



The NPPS has a beautiful headquarters opposite the falls.

forms, two pairs of strong boots and a winter overcoat.

Today, the NPPS staff is made up of 21 special constables, which includes 15 constables, four sergeants, one inspector and the chief. They also have four communicators on staff, as well as two part-time provincial offences officers. In the summer, the NPPS hires up to 40 additional provincial offences officers, all of whom are students looking to get into the law enforcement field. They currently have a complement of 28 provincial offences officers, which Chief Paul Forcier said is like "the farm team for police officers."

The provincial offences officers take on responsibilities like parking enforcement, traffic direction, special

events, lower priority calls for service and minor first-aid related calls. They are not trained or authorized to carry any form of use-of-force equipment and only carry two-way radios for communication. The Service's special constables, however, are armed and receive the same training as a regular police officer. All positions within the NPPS would traditionally be considered civilian roles, despite the fact that their special constables have the same authorities as sworn police officers.

"We used to be police officers like everyone else at one time, but somewhere along the way, we were converted to special constables," said Chief Forcier, who joined the service as a student officer in 1988,



became a constable in 1989 and was named chief in 2019. "There is general acceptance because everyone knows we're very much an anomaly amongst special constables. We've always had the expansive police powers and use of force options."

Adam, who started with the NPPS as a provincial offences officer in 2008 and became a full-time constable in 2013, said



Ten NPPS special constables form a part-time unit known as the High Angle River Team, who are trained in high-angle rope access and rescue, as well as swift water operations.

that even though he and his fellow special constables carry a firearm, go to the OPC and have the power and authority to enforce, among others, the Criminal Code, the Niagara Parks Act, the Highway Traffic Act and the Liquor License Act, there is sometimes still some confusion over the role they play in policing.

"There is no other Service quite like ours in the province," said Adam. "While we are designated as special constables under the Police Services Act, it is not a box we fit into cleanly; and that can sometimes be confusing. We have 15 million visitors who come through our area every year, and it's important for people to know that when they come to us, they're going to get the same level of front-line service that would be provided by any police service."

As the only park police in Ontario, the NPPS takes care of the Niagara Parks and the high-profile tourism within the parks. Chief Forcier recalls how quiet things were during the pandemic lockdown, when the usual throng of tourists to the area was drastically reduced.

"Pre-pandemic, we had about 12-14 million domestic and international visitors annu-

ally. Now, we're probably at about 60 per cent of where we were pre-pandemic," said Chief Forcier. "We came back pretty well, but we're not seeing the American visitors to the degree that we normally would, and they spend more per capita. They might represent 30 per cent of the headcount, but at least 50 per cent of revenue."

The NPPS is fully funded from the budget of the Niagara Parks Commission and operates with an annual budget of approximately \$3.6 million. The Niagara Parks Commission is a Crown agency under the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, and revenue is generated from things like retail, culinary, golf, attractions and parking – not from tax dollars. Not having any tourists during the height of the pandemic drastically reduced the Commission's budget, but thanks to government grants from the province to the NPC, the NPPS was able to retain all of its staff.

"We didn't lose staff or headcount, we just had fewer students," said Chief Forcier. "We had to reduce that number because the traffic wasn't there during the pandemic. Other than that, there wasn't a dramatic impact on staffing for our service."



Regardless of the number of tourists, the NPPS is primarily responsible for 3,274 acres of parkland along 56 kilometres of highway owned and operated under the Niagara Parks Commission, from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. That includes a unique geographical environment in the form of the Niagara Gorge and the Niagara River, which necessitates a specially trained response to unique incidents that occur on their lands. Ten NPPS special constables form a part-time unit known as the High Angle River Team, who are trained in high-angle rope access and rescue, as well as swift water operations. They work in conjunction with other local emergency services, as well as their private sector tourism partners who help facilitate operations in that unique environment.

The Niagara Regional Police (NRPS) maintain jurisdictional authority over all areas of the Niagara Region, including the Niagara Parks, but the two services work together very closely and often assist on each other's calls.

"We've got a long-standing history and working relationship with them. Our officers train and work together, and we run an identical platoon

shift schedule to them. We're constantly interacting and working alongside their members," said Adam. "We often help augment each other if something big happens down in the parks or in the city around the casino district."

Chief Forcier underscored the excellent, long-standing working relationship his service has with the NRPS, who, because the NPPS doesn't have the same functions as a small service, will provide support services, additional investigative services for any major incidents, detective services, major crimes and more.

"Every incident that we deal with goes directly into their central records system," said Chief Forcier. "Their supervisors are notified, detective services, forensics, the coroner – it all happens organically."

With the NPPS's high-profile dedication to promoting visitor safety, the model that has been in place for 135 years is working, despite the anomalies.

"We're not based on a static, residential population, and we're unique that way," said Chief Forcier. "It's not really urban policing. Our international and domestic visitors represent a microcosm of the world in the parks."