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NATURAL HERITAGE DISCUSSION PAPER FEEDBACK AND STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the following:

- 1. The presentation by Karen Antonio-Hadcock, Senior Planner, Long Range and Strategic Planning, be received; and**
- 2. The recommendations contained in the following report dated November 23, 2007, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services, be adopted:**

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council endorse the “Next Steps Workplan” for the eight Natural Heritage Action Areas detailed in Table 1, in Section 4.3 of this report.
2. Regional Council endorse the “Final Natural Heritage Strategic Directions Paper” included as *Attachment 1* of this report.
3. Regional Staff proceed with the creation of an updated draft natural heritage system in consultation with Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, and the Local Municipalities, and that staff bring back the draft system to Committee in Spring 2008 for public review and comment.
4. Planning Staff circulate a copy of this report to the local municipalities, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Ministry of Public Infrastructure and Renewal and the Ministry of Natural Resources.

2. PURPOSE

As a follow up to the release, circulation, and consultation on the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper, this report provides a summary of the discussion generated around the paper, and provides a process for the next steps for natural heritage.

3. BACKGROUND

On May 24, 2007, Regional Council approved Clause 4 of Report 5 of the Planning and Economic Development Committee at which the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper was

received. The discussion paper is intended to stimulate conversation with our stakeholders on updating our natural heritage system and strategy. The paper provides an examination of the emerging policy context surrounding natural heritage, the growth management context in York Region, and identifies 8 Action Areas to ensure a comprehensive strategy for protecting and enhancing the Region's natural heritage.

3.1 The New Policy Context for Natural Heritage Planning

The policy context for natural heritage planning has evolved both at a Provincial level and local level. This new context will assist in providing a framework for a new natural heritage system and strategy.

The Provincial Policy Statement was updated in 2005 to reflect the change in understanding of natural heritage as a system, and defines Natural Heritage Systems as “a system made up of natural heritage features and areas, linked by natural corridors which are necessary to maintain biological and geological diversity, natural functions, viable populations of indigenous species and ecosystems. These systems can include lands that have been restored and areas with the potential to be restored to a natural state.”

In 2005, the Province released the *Greenbelt Plan*, which identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to the agricultural land base and the ecological features and functions across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. The Greenbelt encompasses the existing features of the Niagara Escarpment, and the Oak Ridges Moraine, and adds the “Protected Countryside”. The Greenbelt, including the Oak Ridges Moraine, covers 69% of the Region.

Both the TRCA and the LSRCA have created natural heritage systems for their watersheds. The TRCA's Terrestrial Natural Heritage System Strategy is comprised of three major components: terrestrial natural cover (features), natural processes (functions), and the linkages between them. The system has been mapped and analysed for current health, and strategic (target) areas have been identified to improve the overall health of the system. The LSRCA's natural heritage system for the Lake Simcoe watershed is based on the Provincial Policy Statement and identifies a natural heritage system and a policy strategy to protect its features and functions.

3.2 Growth Management Context

According to the Provincial forecasts contained in the Places to Grow Plan, the Region is expected to have 1.5 million residents, 800,000 jobs, and approximately 500,000 households by 2031. To accompany these forecasts, the Places to Grow Plan and the Greenbelt Plan have established parameters on where and how this growth will be distributed. We understand that the growth in York Region will place significant pressure on our natural, social and economic spheres. The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper, and the Natural Heritage Strategic Directions paper is intended to ensure that natural heritage considerations are a key component to the Region's Growth Management strategy, and to ensure a strong, linked natural heritage system through the Oak Ridges

Moraine and Greenbelt, the existing urban areas and towns and villages, and the potential whitebelt communities.

3.3 Regional Initiatives Leading up to the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper Natural Heritage Workshop

In November 2006, Regional staff held a Natural Heritage Workshop to discuss how to protect and enhance the Region's Natural Heritage System and to have infrastructure planning decisions that are more sustainable. The results of this workshop have been used to assist in the preparation of the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper. The feedback received from our stakeholders has contributed to establishing the components and methods of achieving an enhanced Regional Greenlands System within the context of the Provincial Growth Strategy and Regional growth needs.

Towards Sustainability in York Region Advisory Group

In June 2006, Regional Council received the final report of the *Towards Sustainability in York Region (TSYR) Advisory Group* which provided recommendations on how to make the Regional Official Plan (ROP) and Infrastructure Master Plans more sustainable. In this report, Regional Council endorsed seven key recommendations of the advisory groups. With respect to natural heritage recommendation 1 states:

“The Region, and its local municipalities, in consultation with the Conservation Authorities should complete a linked Natural Heritage System that identifies Key Natural Heritage areas to be protected from development and enhanced. The Region should also develop a transportation master plan that respects the integrity of an interconnected Regional Natural Heritage System.” (Transmittal Letter, page 3)

The Natural Heritage Discussion paper was intended to stimulate the discussion and provide the ground work for the creation of a new linked natural heritage system for York Region, in response to the TSYR recommendations.

Final York Region Sustainability Strategy

The final York Region Sustainability Strategy was endorsed by Regional Council on November 15, 2007. The strategy includes over 100 short-term actions and is based on increased awareness and partnerships to make more sustainable decisions. The following action areas speak directly to natural heritage:

- Identify and adopt an updated linked natural heritage system for York Region in collaboration with the stakeholders, area municipalities and conservation authorities.
- Update the Greening Strategy and Land Securement Initiative for York Region based on sustainability values.



- Review the Regional forest cover target of 25% in the context of the updates to the Greening Strategy, Natural Heritage System and Regional Official Plan.
- Investigate and adopt principles for sustainable green communities in order to create more liveable, energy efficient communities with smaller ecological footprints.
- Continue street tree and reforestation programs to increase green cover in the Region.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

4.1 Natural Heritage Discussion Paper Distribution & Consultation

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper was distributed widely for commentary. The paper was circulated to all local municipalities (Local and Regional Councillors, Planning, Engineering, and Parks Commissioners), Regional Commissioners and Directors, TRCA, LSRCA, Greening Strategy Securement Working Group, all Local Environmental Advisory Committee members, LSEMS working group members, local environmental organizations, development industry representatives, and environmental consultants, and provincial ministries. The paper was also distributed at all the public engagement meetings for the Planning For Tomorrow Growth Management strategy.

Focussed consultation on the discussion paper was also conducted. Consultation Sessions held on the Discussion Paper included:

- BILD York Region Chapter Consultation September 17, 2007. (Feedback in *Attachment 4*)
- Environmental Stakeholders Growth Management/ Natural Heritage Discussion Paper Consultation September 27, 2007. (Feedback in *Attachment 5*)
- Joint focus group on sustainability strategy, natural heritage discussion paper and infrastructure master plan updates October 9, 2007. (Feedback in *Attachment 6*)

4.2 Dialogue Generated by the Discussion Paper

Regional staff received 14 letters on the discussion paper, which are summarized in *Attachment 2* and included in *Attachment 3* to this report. As referenced above, the discussion generated from the 3 consultation sessions are also summarized in *Attachments 4-6*.

In general, the comments were supportive of the action areas represented in the Discussion Paper, in particular updating the Regional Greenlands System to ensure a linked natural heritage system throughout the Region. There were several expressions of interest in continued partnerships and participation in the Regional Natural Heritage Trails Concept Study, Greening Strategy and Restoration and Enhancement.

Linked Natural Heritage System Support

There is a high level of support for the Region to update the existing Greenlands System and ensure a linked natural heritage system throughout the entire Region.

Working Together to Develop the System

The local municipalities, and the Conservation Authorities have requested continued consultation on the Region's Natural Heritage System update, and we will continue to work together throughout the development of the system.

Coordinate with Existing Local Natural Heritage Strategies

Many local municipalities are currently undertaking, or have recently adopted their own natural heritage strategies. It has been requested that the Region recognize the work that has been undertaken, and continue to work with the municipalities which are currently working toward updating their strategies (i.e., Markham and East Gwillimbury).

Relationship between Natural Heritage and Growth Management

Several comments reflect the need to examine the balance between natural heritage protection and meeting the Region's Growth Management objectives.

Support for a Regional Trail Network

The *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* Action Area 6: Establish a Regional Trail Network has received support from the local municipalities and groups such as the Oak Ridges Trail Association. Specific comments on this action area include the recognition of the existing inter-municipal trails including the Nokiidaa Trail.

Investing in Green Infrastructure

There is a high level of support for continued and increased investment in green infrastructure, including restoration and enhancement efforts of our natural heritage system. Investing in our green infrastructure in a similar manner to the investments made in built infrastructure such as roads and sewers has been identified as a key priority.

4.3 Natural Heritage Strategic Directions

The *Natural Heritage Strategic Directions Paper*, appended to this report as *Attachment 1* is the follow up to the *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper*. The Strategic Directions paper incorporates the feedback received on the Discussion Paper, and provides strategic direction on how to proceed with the 8 Action Areas.

The 8 Action Areas were identified in the *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* and are the key implementation areas for ensuring a comprehensive strategy for protecting and enhancing the Region's natural heritage. The action areas are intended to take York Region to the next level in Natural Heritage planning and protection.

NATURAL HERITAGE ACTION AREAS:

- Action 1:* Update our Natural Heritage System.
- Action 2:* Incorporate the Greenbelt Plan into the Regional Official Plan.
- Action 3:* Make Connections in New Communities.
- Action 4:* Restore and Strengthen the Natural Heritage System.
- Action 5:* Adopt a New Approach to Infrastructure.
- Action 6:* Establish a Regional Trail Network.
- Action 7:* Advance the Greening Strategy.
- Action 8:* Continued Awareness and Dialogue.

The strategic directions paper in *Attachment 1* examines how to implement the 8 Action Areas, and outlines the key deliverables.

**Table 1
 Next Steps Workplan**

Action Area	Progress/ Next Steps
1. Update the Natural Heritage System	Draft system for review and consultation Spring 2008 Consultation Spring 2008 Refinements Summer/Fall 2008 Adoption Fall/Winter 2008
2. Greenbelt Conformity	Staff Report January 2008 on conformity process Consultation with Local Municipalities and Public Winter 2008. Conformity Amendment Spring 2008
3. Make Connections in the New Communities	Ongoing work with Markham, Vaughan, and East Gwillimbury on whitebelt natural heritage systems. Finalize Systems through Whitebelt Areas - Winter 2007/2008 for land budget and incorporation into Regional NHS.
4. Restore and Strengthen the Natural Heritage System	Identify Cores and Linkages Spring 2008 Identify priority areas for restoration and enhancement Spring 2008
5. Adopt a New Approach to Infrastructure	Examine opportunities for implementation Spring 2008 Sustainability Principles created Fall 2007 Ongoing work with Infrastructure Planning through to finalization of Master Plans
6. Establish A Regional Trail Network	Regional Natural Heritage Trail Concept Study currently underway Focused consultation throughout Winter 2007/2008

	Report back to Committee in Spring 2008 on results of consultation.
7. Advance the Greening Strategy	Ongoing work with Natural Heritage and Forestry Services on discussion of relevant targets, benchmarks, program objectives Greening Strategy Update Report Spring 2008; Consultation Spring 2008; Adoption of Greening Strategy Fall/Winter 2008
8. Continued Awareness and Dialogue	Consultation on Discussion Paper throughout Spring/Summer 2007. Ongoing consultation with Local Municipalities and Conservation Authorities. Consultation on draft system Spring 2008.

4.4 Relationship to Vision 2026

Both the *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* and the *Natural Heritage Strategic Directions Paper* addresses several goal areas of Vision 2026, including “Enhanced Environment, Heritage and Culture”, “Responding to the Needs of Our Residents”, “Managed and Balanced Growth”, “Infrastructure for a Growing Region” and “Engaged Communities and a Responsive Region”.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* circulation and consultation has been undertaken within the existing staff complement and budget allocation for the Planning and Development Services Department.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Copies of the *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* were distributed to all Local Municipalities. Several Local Municipalities have provided commentary on the paper, which is included as *Attachment 2* to this report.

Regional staff are currently, and will continue to work closely with the Local Municipal staff in the creation of an updated Natural Heritage System for York Region.

As creating a linked natural heritage system in the “white belt” area is a key action area identified within the *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper*, this work will be done in collaboration with affected area municipalities and will attempt to create a sustainable balance between natural heritage, community building and economic objectives.

7. CONCLUSION

The *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* was prepared to stimulate conversation and inform a new approach to natural heritage planning as we plan to accommodate the growth forecasted by the Province. The *Natural Heritage Strategic Directions Paper* provides the critical next steps in the Region's natural heritage strategy.

Updating the Region's existing Greenlands System to incorporate the Greenbelt Plan; create a linked system of cores and corridors; and fully integrate infrastructure with the natural heritage system will be key in ensuring a sustainable future for York Region.

The *Natural Heritage Discussion Paper* has been circulated widely and focussed consultation on the paper has occurred. We have heard that there is a high level of support for updating the Region's Greenlands system to ensure a linked system; that we need to coordinate this strategy with natural heritage updates and growth management work throughout the Region; and that there is a high level of support for the Region's Trail Concept Study and continuing to invest in green infrastructure. The findings of the consultation on the paper and the strategy for moving forward is presented in the *Natural Heritage Strategic Directions Paper*.

It is recommended that the next steps work plan be endorsed and staff proceed with the creation of a draft updated natural heritage system to be brought forward to Council and the public for review in Spring 2008.

For further information about this report, please contact John B. Waller, Director of Long Range and Strategic Planning at 905-830-4444 ext. 1525 or john.waller@york.ca.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(The six attachments referred to in this clause are attached to this report.)