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YORK REGION GREEN STRATEGY 2003 PROGRAM AND ACHIEVEMENTS UPDATE

The Transportation and Works Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, December 17, 2003, from the Commissioner of Transportation and Works and Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. This report be received for information as an update of the York Region Greening Strategy.

2. PURPOSE

This report provides an update on the implementation of the Greening Strategy adopted by Regional Council on May 10, 2001. At the time of adoption, Council set out a variety of tasks to assist in preserving and enhancing the Region's natural environment. This report focuses on the Region's progress in each of nine action areas through 2003, provides an update to Committee and Council on progress of the action plan and identifies future plans and projects of the Greening Strategy.

3. BACKGROUND

The York Region Greening Strategy is multi-focused initiative to help promote public awareness of York Region's natural heritage system and ensure that it is protected, enhanced and maintained for future generations. The Strategy provides the Region with a context for policy and implementation decisions that affect natural systems. It also provides an environmental platform to co-ordinate agency and private sector efforts to improve our natural environment.

After two and a half years since implementation, the Greening Strategy has been well received and supported by the public as an effective program to co-ordinate Regional initiatives and green partnerships.

The Greening Strategy identifies the following nine broad themes for action:

- Information Management.
- Naturalization and Rehabilitation.
- Securement of Priority Greenlands.
- Community Education and Promotion.

- Regional Operations.
- Role of Federal/Provincial Government Legislation.
- Urban Forest Management.
- Corporate Green Partnership.
- Monitoring Results.

Each theme has a series of specific tasks, projects or programs identified with a budget to assist in implementing the Strategy. The majority of these tasks are undertaken through partnerships with other internal departments and external agencies and organizations through a co-ordinated approach to achieve mutual objectives.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Highlighted below are some of the 2003 successes and ongoing initiatives of the Greening Strategy summarized within each of the nine broad program areas.

4.1. Information Management

The importance of maintaining and updating a Geographic Information System (GIS) or digital environmental databases is of paramount importance in conserving natural features. Additionally, ensuring that information is compiled and presented in a manner readily available to the public and other stakeholders also serves to promote and educate the public on our natural heritage system and the advancements the Region is making to protect and enhance it.

Achievements:

- **York Region Environmental Directory** – Initiated the development of an Environmental Directory for York Region residents and groups. This will be a directory of environmental contacts and services within the Region and will be accessible through the Regions web site.
- **Securement Web Site** - Established a Securement web site for use by a number of Stakeholders in the business of securing Greenlands. This web site provides our partners access to relevant natural features data, and can also be used to track securement initiatives of various groups.
- **Natural Feature Inventory** - Updated fieldwork on natural features (e.g. wetlands) in York Region and produced maps to assist in setting Regional priorities for naturalization, rehabilitation and securement, as well as to assist with the implementation of Regional operational activities in an environmentally sound manner.
- **Significant Woodlands Study** - Initiation of a Significant Woodlands Study for York Region. This study will assist with implementation of Regional initiatives in a number of program areas. Some specific programs or initiatives that will benefit from

the results of this study are strategic policy and development planning, land securement, naturalization and rehabilitation, Tree (Forest Conservation) By-law enforcement and education.

4.2 Naturalization and Rehabilitation

The Region is committed to creating, improving and rehabilitating natural areas through the Greening Strategy. In partnership with a variety of organizations, the Region continues to positively impact the quality of our environment.

Achievements:

- **Adopt-A-Stream Crossing Program** – This program, in partnership with Ontario Streams and York Environmental Stewardship (YES), retrofits Regional road stream crossings with new plantings to improve habitat for fish and wildlife, water quality and aesthetics. In 2003 a program manual was developed to direct activities within the program. This program helps prioritize candidate sites and coordinate participation by willing community groups. In addition to production of the manual, 4 sites with planting over 220 trees and shrubs, benefited from community rehabilitation efforts in 2003.
- **York Natural Partnership Program** – The Natural Partnership is a tree-planting program in partnership with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority. In 2003, the planting of over 90,000 trees and 8,000 shrubs on public and private land within York Region was made possible through this program. Over 50 hectares (125 acres) were planted. Also in 2003 a program brochure was developed and distributed providing a significant opportunity to promote the Greening Strategy and the numerous opportunities and benefits available through this Program.
- **Reforestation Success Stories - Case Book** - This publication, scheduled for completion in early 2004, is intended to promote reforestation to landowners, agencies and other community stakeholders. This document will highlight perspectives from across the country, successes, innovative projects, vision statements and personal accounts of reforestation.

This project was undertaken in partnership with the Centre for Land and Water Stewardship, University of Guelph and the Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto.

- **Afforestation/Reforestation Guidebook for Resource Managers** – This guidebook, to be prepared over the winter and spring of 2004, will assist the Region in determining the capital and operational costs for reforestation activities and operational maintenance of secured properties. This will enable the Region to make sound decisions as we strive to protect and enhance a healthy natural heritage system for future generations.

4.3 Securement of Priority Greenlands

In addition to securing priority greenlands through education and stewardship, there are a series of property acquisition tools, which are relevant to the Greenlands Securement Strategy. These tools include bequests, easements, leaseback agreements, long term leases, donations and fee simple purchases. Through the Greening Strategy, the Region seeks to maximize environmental and public benefit and minimize cost through the use of these tools and strategic partnerships. A general summary of the achievements is outlined below. The Securement Criteria document, which directs and rationalizes securement activities, was reviewed by the Senior Management Group (SMG) and will be presented as a policy report to the Planning and Development Committee in January 2004. In addition, a comprehensive Greenland Securement Strategy achievements report is scheduled for the February 2004 meeting of Transportation and Works Committee.

Achievements

- **Securement Criteria** - Draft securement criteria were circulated for comments to agencies and stakeholders in York Region in 2003. These criteria have been finalized and following adoption by Regional Council will direct the Greening securement activities in 2004 and beyond.
- **Internal Evaluation Team for Securement Initiatives** - In the spring of 2003 the Internal Evaluation Team (IET) for Securement Initiatives was established. This inter-departmental team assesses properties for potential Regional involvement in securement initiatives using Criteria designed to reflect Regional priority for Greenlands Securement. The criteria and the associated Property Evaluation Form are being tested through their application by the IET. Currently in draft form, the Criteria are scheduled to being considered by the Planning and Economic Development Committee this month.
- **Extension Services for Strategic Regional Land Securement** - In late summer 2003, the services of a consultant were retained on a pilot basis to proactively pursue strategic securement properties within York Region.
- **Partnership with Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC)** - York Region is currently in the third year of a three-year joint venture with the NCC. The intent of the partnership is to protect environmentally significant and sensitive lands on the Oak Ridges Moraine and throughout York Region. Under this agreement a Regional contribution of \$100,000 annually, is levered against additional funds to secure a minimum of \$600,000 worth of land through a variety of securement tools. The overall target of \$1.8 million has been significantly exceeded. Details are provided below under the heading *Land Secured within York Region in 2003*.
- **Partnership with Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust** - In August 2002 the Region signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust (ORMLT). Through this MOU, the Region supports the efforts of the ORMLT to secure donations of lands or implement conservation easements for lands that have

natural heritage significant on the Oak Ridges Moraine within York Region. This agreement examines support required on a case by case basis. In 2003, the Region assisted the Land Trust in securing a conservation easement on a key property adjacent to the York Regional Forest in the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville. Details are provided below under the heading *Land Secured within York Region in 2003*. Through this partnership, a significant number of other properties are also being pursued for potential securement in 2004.

- **Land Secured within York Region in 2003** – Three parcels of land totalling approximately 73 hectares (182 acres) have been secured during 2003. These include:
 - The donation of a ~48 hectare (120 acre) parcel of land by the MacMillan Family to the Nature Conservancy of Canada through the York Region / NCC Joint Venture. This significant Nature Reserve is located on the southern flank of the Oak Ridges Moraine within the City of Vaughan.
 - The donation of a conservation easement on a ~24 hectare (60 acre) parcel on the Oak Ridges Moraine to the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust. This property comes out as a priority when assessed against the draft Regional Securement Criteria. This property presents a potential afforestation opportunity and is in close proximity to the York Regional Forest in Whitchurch-Stouffville.
 - The transfer of a ~1 hectare (2 acre) parcel adjacent to the Brown Hill Regional Forest Tract in conjunction with a development approval in East Gwillimbury.

4.4 Community Education and Promotion

Awareness of the health and economic benefits of our natural resources is an essential factor towards securing a healthy Greenlands System for future generations. The Region has devised several promotional and education initiatives to raise awareness of the natural environment.

Achievements:

- **Greening Strategy Logo** – This logo was created to brand and symbolize York Region's enduring commitment to environmental protection and the Greening Strategy. Throughout 2003 this logo has appeared on a number of brochures, products and media releases, increasing awareness of the Region's proactive approach to environmental management.
- **Greening Strategy Displays and Presentations** – Awareness of the Region's Greening Strategy is being increased by including a comprehensive display at various internal and external events, and making presentations at a number of different forums. Over the course of 2003, the Greening display was brought to approximately 15 events with staff present to answer questions. In addition, comprehensive presentations were made to over 15 interest groups.

- **Everyday Guide to the York Regional Forest** – This guide was reprinted in 2003. While the guide continues to promote the Regional Forest system and the Greening Strategy, it has been updated to include maps of all Regional Forest trails, further promoting use and enjoyment of all Forest Tracts.
- **Nature's Classroom** – This is a public educational program developed in partnership with the Regional Forest Advisory Team. The purpose of the program is to increase community knowledge of the interrelationships that exist in the forest ecosystem and to increase awareness of the natural and social heritage of York Regional. There are two major program areas within Nature's Classroom:

Forest Festivals and Events – These promotional and educational events are hosted on a monthly basis at the Regional Forest properties. Forest Events are scheduled monthly with Forest Festivals being larger seasonal forums that in 2003 occurred in June and September. At the Fall Forest Festival alone over 200 people came out to the North Tract to learn more about the Greening Strategy and our Regional Forests. Across the year, an ever increasing number of residents take the time to participate in the Regional Forest Festivals and Events.

York Regional Forest Education Program – Natures Classroom presents a unique opportunity for a variety of groups to experience and learn about the forest. This program is available to groups at their request and is tailored to their needs. By the end of 2003 approximately 15 such events are likely to have occurred reaching an estimated 300 people including teachers, students, community and interest groups. This year, this one of a kind program provided the opportunity for seniors, special needs groups, and physically and developmentally challenged community members to experience nature in the forest in a safe environment; a need that can not be met by most other environmental and resource education programs.

4.5 Regional Operations

Through the Greening Strategy, the Region seeks to continually expand and improve our protection and enhancement of the natural environment while providing the necessary infrastructure and services to our residents.

Achievements:

- **Pesticide Reduction Guidelines** – Spearheaded by the York Region Health department, these guidelines ensure that the Region is doing its part to carefully scrutinize the use of pesticides and to minimize their use in day to day Regional Operations.
- **Recycling at the York Regional Forest** – A pilot program is being investigated to implement a recycling program at the Regional Forest. This program will allow the Region to lead by example and display signage promoting the environmental benefits

of the 3 Rs - reducing, reusing and recycling.

- **Regional Forest Stewardship Council Certification** – The Regional Forest properties and forest management practices were audited by Smartwood in 2003 and were received this internationally recognized certification for the third consecutive year.

4.6 Role of Federal/Provincial Government Legislation

While the Greening Strategy focuses on proactive tools to protect, enhance and promote our natural environment, legislation can be an effective tool to further the objectives of the Greening Strategy.

Achievements:

- **Forest Conservation By-law** – A proposed new Forest Conservation By-law under the new Municipal Act is currently under review and subject to public consultation. Public open houses were held in the fall of 2003. This By-law, intended to replace the existing Tree By-law, is another tool available to assist in protecting the Region's Greenlands while recognizing that education and stewardship are the preferred tools.
- **Managed Forest Tax Incentive Program** – Recently the Assessment Act has been amended. As a result of this amendment, the Region has the opportunity to take a proactive role in the protection of privately owned forests by working with the Province to promote the program. In addition the Region will review the recent legislative changes and evaluate the cost benefit of providing additional tax incentives as a mechanism to further protect the Region's forests.

4.7 Urban Forest Management

The urban forest plays a significant role in enhancing our natural environment. Trees provide many environmental benefits such as oxygen production, aesthetics, temperature moderation – in addition to enhancing the quality of life in our Region.

Achievements:

- **Urban Forest Management Plan** – The Urban Forest Management Plan is under review. This plan will direct how we establish and manage natural vegetation on Regional Properties outside of the Regional Forest. Specifically, it will establish criteria for Tree Planting within Road Right of Ways and identify means to improve the natural environment on other regional properties.
- **Baker's Sugarbush Forest Management Plan** – In partnership with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, a forest Management Plan is well underway for the Baker's Sugarbush. This plan will help ensure that this feature maintains its vigour and health in an urban environment, and is available for the enjoyment of future generations. In addition an operational management agreement is currently under

review by Regional staff.

- **Annual Tree Planting and Streetscaping** – A significant Regional initiative towards increasing our urban forest is tree planting and naturalization within Regional Road right-of-ways. In 2003, over 16.8 km of Regional Roads were planted (2800 trees).
- **Street Tree Inventory and Health Assessment** – In 2003, the condition of existing street trees on medians and boulevards within York Region was assessed and documented. This information will help the Region to assess and improve the cost benefits of the program.
- **Spring Property Forest Management Plan** – In partnership with Ducks Unlimited in the Town of Aurora, we have developed a draft forest management plan to assist with the protection and enhancement of this important woodlot.
- **Urban Habitat Award of Excellence** – Through the Greening Strategy, the concept of a Greening Development Award of Excellence is being assessed through a partnership with Wildlife Habitat Canada.

4.8 Corporate Green Partnerships

The Greening Strategy is successfully administered with the assistance of numerous partners. Partnerships have been established with local municipalities, other levels of government, academic agencies, and private and public stakeholders.

Achievements:

- **Strategic Partnerships** – York Region continues to demonstrate leadership through Green Partnerships. These partnerships enable us to leverage additional funds, services and support, and optimize the experience of other groups and individuals. Some key partners in 2003 included York Environmental Stewardship, the Conservation Authorities, the Universities of Toronto and Guelph, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Oak Ridges Moraine Foundation and Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust.
- **Private Sector Partnerships** – In 2004, staff will explore the opportunity for Corporate Greening Strategy and Project Partners.

4.9 Monitoring and Reporting

The Transportation and Works and Planning and Economic Development departments have reported regularly on the progress of the Greening Strategy including securement activities.

Achievements:

- **Regional Council Reports** – Reports on the Greening Strategy and Greenlands Securement Strategy achievements are brought to the Transportation and Work Committee annually.
- **Greening Achievements Brochure** – A Greening Achievements brochure was released in the spring of 2003. It is intended that comparable brochures be prepared at least once every two years to keep the public apprised of the leadership role the Region is taking in the field of environmental management, protection and enhancement.
- **Greening Strategy Web Site** – Revisions are underway to update the web site to share information on the Greening Strategy and its achievements, and further promote feedback from the public, agencies and other stakeholders.

4.10 Next Steps

The Region's demonstrated commitment to the environment has resulted in greater acknowledgement by the public and other agencies that we are a leader in the field. By continuing to pursue strategic partnerships, the Region is making the most of available resources, technology and expertise to ensure that York Region's natural heritage features and functions are a legacy for future generations.

The accomplishments of 2003 set the stage for a high profile and productive 2004 for the Region. The additional data acquired, including Significant Woodlands and wetlands data, will be used to make even more sound decisions over the years to come in the areas of education and stewardship, strategic and development planning, Tree By-law enforcement and education, as well as naturalization initiatives.

The Greening Achievement brochure and the updated Everyday Guide to the York Regional Forest will be used as tools to promote the resources and knowledge available to York Region residents in the areas of natural resource enjoyment and management.

The advancements that have been made with respect to securing a healthy greenlands system for future generations, including the formation of an Internal Evaluation Team for securement initiatives and the refinement and adoption of Securement Criteria, will ensure that future decisions being made in this area are sound and in the best interest of the environment, the Region, and its residents.

We will continue to evaluate and review our education programs to ensure that they offer the most to our residents and increase public awareness. Our education programs will also strive to increase public commitment to land stewardship.

Through 2004 the Greening Strategy will focus on the following:

- Review and assessment of the Greening Strategy, including defining goals and objectives, with appropriate benchmarks and performance measures and timelines. Public feedback will help guide the refinement of the Strategy and its implementation.
- Continue to improve environmental information and public access to it.
- Secure a healthy Regional Greenlands system by utilizing the Regional Securement Criteria and pursuing property securement through stewardship, conservation easements, bequests, donations and acquisition.
- Finalizing the Significant Woodlands Study and incorporating it into existing policy and program areas.
- Offer new and improved education and extension opportunities to the public.
- Continue to pursue strategic partnerships to implement and expand the Regional Greening and Securement Strategies.

4.11 Relation to Vision 2026

The Greening Strategy continues to support Vision 2026 and such key goal statements as:

“In 2026, York Region residents will continue to value and embrace the Region’s unique natural heritage (land, air, water) and cultural heritage (sites and buildings important to our history, faiths and cultures).”

“In 2026, York Region will have grown at a pace that supports healthy communities, economic vitality, sustainable natural environment and effective human services”

The strategy strengthens the Region’s commitment to focus on Vision 2026 action areas including:

- Protecting sensitive features such as forests, watersheds, the Oak Ridges Moraine and Lake Simcoe.
- Promoting a permanent linked greenlands system.
- Continuing to develop and build strategies for a green region, such as the York Regional Forest Management Plan, the Greening Strategy, the Greenlands Property Securement Strategy.
- Taking a leadership role in the development and implementation of environmental strategies and conservation activities.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The approved York Region 2003 budget contained the funds necessary to undertake all of the greening tasks identified for 2003. Operational dollars across a number of Departments were also in the budget to assist in greening initiatives.

The proposed 2004 budget, including the Transportation and Works capital allocation (e.g. Greening – land securement and streetscaping) and operation funding (e.g. Forestry), identifies the funds required to support the Greening Strategy. Land securement initiatives related to Greening Strategy implementation will be drawn from the Greenlands Securement reserve, 2004 allocation of \$1.4 million dollars. As in 2003 approximately \$400,000 would support Greening Strategy and Securement programs including partnership development, stewardship, policy planning, monitoring and acquisition activities for 2004. This allocation is reflected in the 2004 Transportation and Works budget and workplan.

The Greening Coordinator position has been a contract position for the past two and a half years. In order to ensure the ongoing success of the Greening Strategy, the next steps include supporting the evolution of the Regional Greening Co-ordinator position from a contract to a permanent full time position. This position is responsible for the co-ordination of expenditures from the \$1,400,000 Greening Securement budget allocation and the administration of other Transportation and Works budget funds, which are included in the proposed budget, and therefore, requires consistent administration tracking and reporting. Co-ordination between external partners and other Regional Departments (Planning and Development Services, Health, Finance, Corporate Services) requires considerable resources. The program needs a staff co-ordinator to both manage the workload and provide program continuity for the partnership based implementation.

The Greening Strategy has taken root and is branching out. We have built on the many success of the implementation of this program in the past. York Region is recognised internationally for their achievements in the implementation of this strategic program. The Greening Strategy has been branded and is identifiable as a corporate program with considerable public and political support.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Local municipalities are important partners in the Greening Strategy and are being consulted on a number of implementation items. Area Municipalities are also members of the Land Securement Working Group. As well, through the recent Vision 2026 program, the people of York Region have reiterated the importance of the Region's natural heritage.

7. CONCLUSION

The Greening Strategy, after almost three years of implementation, has resulted in York Region being recognized as a leader in the environmental field. In addition to the significant on the ground gains, including increased tree planting and additional lands secured, the Region has demonstrated its commitment and leadership on environmental matters, public education and outreach, research and monitoring. Our ongoing commitment to the Greening Strategy will continue to improve the quality of life for current and future residents.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.