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YORK REGION “NATURAL HERITAGE SYSTEM” WORKSHOP FEEDBACK

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, January 8, 2007, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council endorse the “Next Steps Workplan” outlined in Section 4.6.
2. A copy of this staff report be distributed to all area municipalities for information purposes and to request input on how to effectively implement the endorsed Next Steps Workplan.
3. A copy of this staff report be distributed to the Ministry of Public Infrastructure Renewal and the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing for information purposes.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this staff report is to inform Regional Council of the results and feedback from the *York Region Natural Heritage System Workshop* held on November 1, 2006 at the Glenway Country Club in Newmarket. The purpose of the workshop was two-fold:

1. How to identify a complete and linked Natural Heritage System for the Region.
2. How to integrate a protected and restored natural heritage system into the infrastructure planning process.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 Context

According to the Provincial forecasts contained in the *Places to Grow Plan*, the Region is expected to have 1.5 million residents by 2031, as well as 780,000 jobs and 500,000 households. 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 throughout the Region.



Given this forecasted growth, the Region has embarked upon a growth management strategy that incorporates sustainability principles. The values of “Sustainable Natural Environment”, “Healthy Communities” and “Economic Vitality” (the themes of the Regional Official Plan (ROP)) will be simultaneously integrated into all growth-related decisions. In keeping with the sustainability theme, the Region aims to fully integrate an identified linked and complete Natural Heritage System with the Infrastructure Master Plan processes for water and wastewater, transportation and transit, and pedestrian and bicycling.

3.2 Sustainability Initiative: The 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* on how to make the Regional Official Plan (ROP) and Infrastructure Master Plans more sustainable. In this staff report, Regional Council also endorsed the “Seven Key Recommendations” outlined in the transmittal letter of the final report. Specifically, Key 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, p.3).

The Natural Heritage System Workshop is one step towards fulfilling the recommendations of the *TSYR Advisory Group*.

3.3 Growth Management Public Information and Engagement Program

In September, 2006, Regional Council received an update report on the *Growth Management Public Information and Engagement Program*. This report highlighted key issues that were raised at a series of public forums and focus groups during the Spring and Summer of 2006. The key issues relevant to this staff report are as follows:

Growth/Congestion and Provision of Services: The majority of residents at the public meetings recognized that growth was likely going to happen, however there was significant discussions regarding the pace of growth. As well, questions were raised as to whether our human services, transit and transportation systems and water and sewer services can keep pace with the growth.

Sustainability: Many people and organizations expressed the opinion that future growth and development be sustainable from a number of perspectives including energy, security of food sources, water, air and the natural environment and financial resources. Adoption of a triple bottom-line analysis (natural environment, economy, community) of major decisions would assist in this regard.

Natural Heritage: Protection and investment in a linked natural heritage system remains a strong concern for the majority of York Region residents. There was considerable focus on Lake Simcoe and ground and surface water resources.

Considering the nature of discussions at both the *TSYR Advisory Group* and the Growth Management Engagement Forums, the key objective of the Natural Heritage System Workshop was to discuss how to protect and enhance the Region's Natural Heritage System and to have better infrastructure planning decisions that are more environmentally sensitive. It is intended that the workshop proposed action items will be carried out in partnership with local municipalities, and Regional stakeholders and partners. These ideas will inform the updates to the ROP and Infrastructure Masters Plans.

In addition, the issues addressed in the Natural Heritage System workshop and the New Communities Workshop (also an item on this Committee agenda), provide useful input to the Region's Sustainability Strategy. A preliminary draft of this document will be presented to Regional Council in March 2006.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The following outlines the event and feedback from attendees.

4.1 Agenda and Speakers

The workshop was a half day forum, beginning at 8:00am and adjourning at 12:15pm. The complete agenda of the workshop, including a list of speakers/presentations, is included in this report as *Attachment 1*.

4.2 Attendees

A total of 57 Regional stakeholders and organizations attended the workshop from such diverse groups as government, environment, and the development industry. Table 1 below provides a breakdown of attendees by industry sector.

Table 1
York Region Natural Heritage System Workshop Attendees by Sector

Sector	No. of Attendees	% Attendees
Conservation Authority	7	12%
Development Industry	3	5%
Environmental Groups	15	26%
Area Municipal Government	12	21%
Regional Government	14	25%
Provincial Government	5	9%
Other	1	2%
TOTAL	57	100%

4.3 Summary of Presentations

A number of presentations were made by Regional staff emphasizing the need to rethink how to integrate the environment into infrastructure planning. An overview of each presentation is summarized below:

- York Region is anticipating significant growth in the future. Key issues will be: the Environment, Growth, Infrastructure, Moving York (Goods & People), Economy, Intensification, Human Services, Quality of Life, Culture, and Quality of Place.
- Natural Heritage System Planning requires the protection of what York Region has, rehabilitation of what has been lost, and a goal of enhancing and strengthening the Natural Heritage System.
- New infrastructure will be needed to accommodate the anticipated significant growth in the Region. This infrastructure needs to be coordinated and located in a way that minimizes impacts. The Region must take a new innovative approach to infrastructure planning that protects the Natural Heritage System. This will be aided by applying best practices in planning and consultation.

Presentation slides for the above three presentations are included in this report as *Attachment 2*.

4.4 Workshop Conclusions

Two break-out sessions were held during the workshop on the topics of the “Natural Heritage System” and “Infrastructure”. Staff summaries and the points raised in these break-out sessions are detailed as *Attachment 3*. Key recommendations from each session are listed below:

4.4.1 Natural Heritage System Recommendations

The Natural Heritage System break-out session focused on how to identify a Regional Natural Heritage System. Attendees were asked three questions: 1) Did the Region get it right? 2) What does the Region need to make it work? and 3) What does the Region need to improve? Recommendations from this session include:

- Region needs to update the Natural Heritage System.
- Natural Heritage System needs to be understood in terms of features and functions.
- Natural Heritage System needs to be connected within the Region and linked beyond the Region (i.e. Toronto, Peel, Simcoe, Durham).
- System needs to recognize the importance of biodiversity, water systems, and human use (i.e. trails, passive recreation).
- Principles should include: Protecting, Linking, and Restoration.
- Developing sustainable communities is vital to protecting the Natural Heritage System.
- Need indicators of progress and to report back regularly.
- There should be a focus on Natural Heritage restoration in existing urban areas.
- Education on the value of the Natural Heritage System and its economic and quality of life benefits is required.
- Recognize that some site specific loss is inevitable, but loss that occurs should be compensated. Quality of the whole system, as opposed to quantity, is important.
- Broad consultation/collaboration/partnerships are vital.
- Develop the equivalent of a Natural Heritage Master Plan.

4.4.2 Infrastructure Session

The Infrastructure break-out session focused on the interaction between regional infrastructure and the regional natural heritage system. Attendees were asked if current regional policy and processes provide adequate direction for this interaction in regards to best practice standards, as well as implementation, mitigative and restorative measures. Recommendations for this session include:

- Natural Heritage and Infrastructure planning needs to be better integrated.
- Need for a defined Natural Heritage System to be used as input into the Infrastructure Master Plans.
- Infrastructure projects should focus on protecting and enhancing Natural Heritage System as an opportunity for net gain.
- First objective should be to avoid Natural Heritage features where possible.
- Need to stratify the Natural Heritage System from most important to least important features.
- Master Plan process is key to long range planning and Natural Heritage protection.
- Master Plans should emphasize sustainability and Natural Heritage protection.
- Master Plans should have more status in Environmental Assessment (EA) process.
- Utilize new science/technologies and innovation in design/construction.
- EA process needs to be improved – it has become a regulatory tool and one used to delay development rather than make it better.

- Develop an expedited EA process for transit.
- Strive for the public “input” not “review”.
- Collaboration between stakeholders, experts, and the public.
- Some loss of Natural Heritage will occur with increased growth, but better long term Natural Heritage and Infrastructure plans can result in system wide net gains.
- Plan urban structure and infrastructure for the ultimate York Region.
- Need to adopt infrastructure Best Practices.

4.5 Overall Comments

Attendees were asked to complete an evaluation form. Ninety-four percent (94%) reported that the workshop helped them to better understand the issues that exist between infrastructure and natural heritage. The complete findings of the workshop evaluation form are included as *Attachments 4* and *5*.

Based on the break-out session recommendations, three key points emerged from the Natural Heritage System Workshop discussions as follows:

- Update the Regional Natural Heritage System
- Identify better and innovative management practices in infrastructure planning, technology and construction that protect and enhance the Natural Heritage System.
- Use the input from this workshop, along with the New Communities Workshop, to produce a discussion paper on an updated Natural Heritage System.

Details of the workshop, including speaker presentations, have been posted on the Region’s external website under the “*Planning for Tomorrow*” icon on the homepage.

4.6 Next Steps

Regional staff will use the feedback from the Natural Heritage System Workshop and other related forums to pursue opportunities to strengthen the interrelationship between maintaining the integrity of the natural heritage system and the infrastructure planning process. Next steps include:

- Distributing the workshop break-out group feedback to participants for their review and input.
- Defining the Regional Natural Heritage System.
- Creating a discussion paper that updates the greenlands system, explains the Greenbelt Plan conformity exercise, recommends methods to enhance natural heritage cores and strengthen linkages, and identifies programs and partnerships. This paper could serve as a backgrounder for a long-term management plan.
- Updating the Greening Strategy and continuing to secure quality Regional greenlands.
- Presenting recommendations to the Province on effective reform of the EA process.
- Preparing a best practices document on how to interconnect infrastructure planning with the natural heritage system.
- Integrating feedback into the Preliminary Draft Sustainability Strategy.

- Continuing consultation on the natural heritage system with the conservation authorities, Regional partners and local municipalities and other key stakeholders
- Updating the ROP and Infrastructure Master Plans using the workshop feedback to ensure the protection and restoration of the Regional Natural Heritage System.

4.7 Relationship to Vision 2026

This staff report speaks to 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 total cost of the Region’s Natural Heritage System Workshop is \$4,167.00. This amount is within the budget allocation for the Planning and Development Services Department for the fiscal year 2006. Any additional cost resulting from the workshop will be reported to Regional Council in a subsequent staff report.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Area municipalities participated in the Natural Heritage System Workshop. Their input will assist the Region in preparing an integrated Natural Heritage System and Infrastructure Master Plan. Their knowledge and expertise in their respective municipality also helped to inform attendees of the Region’s diverse and unique features.

7. CONCLUSION

The Natural Heritage System Workshop successfully brought together representatives from diverse sectors to generate ideas on: 1) how to identify a complete and linked Natural Heritage System for the Region; and, 2) how to integrate the natural heritage system into the infrastructure planning process.

The three key points that emerged from the workshop included: updating the Regional Natural Heritage System and identifying better and innovative management practices in infrastructure planning that protects and enhances the natural heritage system. As well, the input from this workshop, along with the New Communities Workshop will be used as a basis for a discussion paper on an updated Natural Heritage System. The discussion paper may also be used to inform an update of the Region’s Greening Strategy.

The workshop represents a step towards fulfilling the recommendations from the TSYR Advisory Group, as well as providing input to the Preliminary Draft Sustainability

Strategy. The ideas generated from the workshop will also be incorporated into the updates to the ROP and Infrastructure Master Plans.

For further information about this report, please contact John 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 attachments referred to in this clause are attached to this report.)