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OAK RIDGES CORRIDOR PARK MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Transportation and Works Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, February 21, 2007, from the Commissioner of Transportation and Works and the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council endorse the Oak Ridges Corridor Park Management Plan prepared by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and as outlined in this report.
2. Staff be directed to investigate opportunities for the Region to support the development and operation of the Park and report back to Council with a proposed plan and its cost implications.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The Oak Ridges Corridor Park Management Plan was prepared for the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, as directed by the Province, for lands being transferred from the current land owners to ORC as part of the Provincial Land Exchange Agreement.
- The Plan outlines management and site restoration details.
- The Plan indicates that Park development, including reforestation and other habitat creation projects on some one hundred and eighty hectares, will be funded through \$3.5 million provided by the developers as part of the Land Exchange Agreement.
- On going operation of the Park is anticipated to be funded from revenue generated from the Bathurst Glen Golf Course and other leases for portions of the land.
- The Plan proposes that York Region be a partner for reforestation efforts and monitoring wildlife activity within Regional Road rights of way in the vicinity of the Park.
- All costs are proposed to be covered by the developer contribution and on going revenue generation.
- Staff is proposing that the plan be endorsed by Regional Council with no Regional financial contribution required at this time.

3. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to advise Regional Council of the recommendations of the Oak Ridges Moraine Corridor Park Management Plan and to seek Council endorsement of the Plan and direction to investigate further opportunities for the Region to support the development and operation of the Park as requested by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA).

4. BACKGROUND

The Oak Ridges Corridor Park consists of approximately 428 hectares (1,057 acres) of land that will be transferred by private owners and developers to the Province of Ontario as part of the Pickering Land Exchange Agreement reached in 2004. The intent of the transfer of lands is to provide for a natural continuous east-west corridor that protects the headwaters of two major watersheds – the Humber and Rouge Rivers. The limit of the Park, location of the trail and proposed restoration areas are identified on the Trails Master Plan (*Attachment 1*). A large version of this figure, prepared by the Consulting Team undertaking the Management Plan, will be available at Committee.

In 2004, the Province of Ontario, through the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, requested that the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) develop a Management Plan for the lands with the dual objectives that the lands be managed to protect and restore natural ecosystems, and that a five kilometre pedestrian trail, ultimately linked to the Oak Ridges Trail, be designed and built across the lands.

In October 2005, Regional Council approved the installation of a Traffic Control Signal, at the expense of the TRCA, on Yonge Street in the location of the preferred crossing of the Oak Ridges Corridor Park portion of the Oak Ridges Trail.

This Management Plan was prepared for the TRCA by AMEC Earth and Environmental, and has been approved by the TRCA and at its meeting #8/06 (October 27, 2006). The TRCA resolved that the Plan be sent to members of the Oak Ridges Corridor Park Management Plan Advisory Committee with a request that the document be endorsed and that partners consider opportunities for providing multi-year funding to support the implementation of the plan and operation of the Park. This report identifies opportunities for the Region to assist in Park implementation.

5. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The Oak Ridges Corridor Park Management Plan was developed after considerable discussion with representatives from government, non-government organizations, and private citizens (*Attachment 2*). Staff from the Region were active members of the Advisory Committee. Committee meetings and public meetings were held between June

16, 2005 and January 10, 2006. The Park lands are designated as Natural Core and Natural Linkage within the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. The plan addresses trails, site protection and restoration, education, outreach and monitoring all of which are permitted and encouraged within the Conservation Plan.

A Vision for the Park was developed by the Advisory Committee:

The Oak Ridges Corridor Park will be a sanctuary for nature and an essential ecological linkage on the Oak Ridges Moraine where visitors can learn about ecosystem features and functions, wildlife and human influences, and enjoy activities that are compatible with the natural and cultural values of the park.

It is envisioned that the park will become Regional significant green space in an urbanizing landscape.

The two Goals developed for the Park are as follows:

1. To support the implementation of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Act by contributing to the protection, restoration and enhancement of the Moraine's ecological functions, protecting water quality and quantity, maintaining the integrity of the continuous natural system and fostering partnerships for stewardship.
2. To address the challenge of sustaining a sanctuary for nature in an urban setting by including public uses that provide opportunities for passive recreation, linkages to the Oak Ridges Trail, and experiential learning, while protecting the environmental integrity of the Park.

The following is a summary of the recommendations of the Plan. *Attachment 1* shows the proposed Management Plan for the Park. The Financial section of the Plan, as well as the Recommendations and Implementation chapter are included as *Attachment 3* to this report.

5.1 Trails

Detailed designs for the east-west pedestrian trail were created, based on numerous site visits, public workshops and an examination of the various alternatives. The primary "spine trail" is approximately 5 km long extending from the Bathurst Glen Golf Course on the east side of Bathurst Street across Yonge Street to Old Colony Road. The spine trail is situated within the "optimum corridor" for the ultimate alignment of the Oak Ridges Trail as determined by the Oak Ridges Trail Association through their master planning exercise. Eventually this trail will link to the proposed Oak Ridges Community Centre at Lake Wilcox to be built on land located on the west side of Bayview Avenue at the east end of Lake Wilcox. The proposed Oak Ridges Community Centre site is identified on *Attachment 1*. In preparation for the routing of this trail, meetings were held with the landowners and representatives from York Region to examine potential pedestrian crossing sites at Yonge Street, and a preferred crossing site was chosen near

the existing Lebovic Sales Pavilion adjacent to Bond Lake. The location and installation of traffic lights at this location was approved by Regional Council on October 27th, 2005, subject to funding by TRCA.

In addition to the east-west spine trail, the plan proposes consideration of additional smaller trails and lookouts throughout the park lands.

5.2 Site Protection and Restoration

The current Park landscape consists of forests, wetlands, hedgerows, grassland, agricultural areas, waterbodies, human heritage features (an example being the Dynamo House adjacent to Bond Lake) and the Bathurst Glen Golf Course. With the exception of the Golf Course, active and abandoned agricultural lands are proposed to be rehabilitated into forest, wetland or grassland. It is proposed that the Golf Course continue to be operated in its current capacity with an objective to have the course designated a “Certified Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary”. The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan permits the continued operation of the existing Golf Course within the Natural Linkage designation. Efforts will be made to make the operations of the Golf Course sensitive to the environment, compatible with the human use objectives of the Plan, and will not preclude use of the site by wildlife. The Plan proposes that Heritage structures be secured to prevent vandalism and structural deterioration.

5.3 Education, Outreach and Monitoring

The Plan includes recommendations for trail access facilities, including parking areas and large interpretation signs with maps, regulations and information about the features within the Park. It is expected that the Oak Ridges Community Centre, at the east end of Lake Wilcox, will provide further opportunities for interpretive displays and programming related to the Park and the future Oak Ridges Moraine. Guided talks in partnership with existing naturalist groups are also recommended. Programs can be developed in partnership with the York Region Public and Catholic District School Boards. Additional avenues for education outside the Park include articles in newspapers and magazines, displays at local events and cultural activities such as plays or art exhibits featuring Moraine themes.

A number of community organizations have already expressed an interest in participating in stewardship of the park. They include Oak Ridges Friends of the Environment, Oak Ridges Trail Association and the Richmond Hill Naturalists. In addition, it would benefit the Park to establish a specific “Friends of the Park” group.

5.4 Park Development and Operation

The Plan recommends partnerships with York Region for the trail crossing of Yonge Street and site rehabilitation. Park development and operation has the potential to advance Regional environmental objectives as set out in the Greening Strategy. Opportunities include reforestation, wetland and grassland restoration, education and stewardship and environmental monitoring. In this regard, the Management Plan proposes the restoration of one hundred and eighty (180) hectares of land. The resolution

by TRCA requests Regional endorsement of the Plan, and consideration of multi-year funding to support the implementation of the Plan and operation of the Park. The Management Plan identifies sufficient funding from the Developers contribution (\$3.5 million) to finance development of the park. Park development includes construction of the trail and associated facilities, site restoration, etc. The Plan proposes that York Region partner with TRCA for site restoration.

Ongoing operation and maintenance of the Park is proposed to be covered by revenue generated from the Bathurst Glen Golf Course and other leases, sufficient to cover the estimated on-going operational costs.

Since the Plan identifies sufficient funding for the anticipated Park development and operation costs, staff is not recommending further funding from York Region. Rather, staff is recommending further exploration of a partnership sharing Regional technical expertise in reforestation and forest management, in addition to monitoring wildlife mortality on Regional Roads adjacent to the Park and further mitigation measures in the future if necessary.

In the event additional funds are required for operation and management of the Park the Region will be advocating for on-going Provincial funding.

There may also be a role for the Region in ongoing education and communication about the values of the Park, the Oak Ridges Moraine, and environmental protection in general.

5.5 Relationship to Vision 2026

The Region's endorsement of the Oak Ridges Corridor Park Management Plan is consistent with the Greening and Securement Strategies. These proactive environmental strategies continue 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 Strategies strengthen 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 and the Greenlands Property Securement Strategy.
- Taking a leadership role in the development and implementation of environmental strategies and conservation activities.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Management costs for the Park, as articulated in the Plan, are estimates only and are distinguished from the one-time costs to develop and rehabilitate the Park that are expected to be covered by the funds (\$3.5 million) provided by the developers to the Province. Revenue will be generated from the Bathurst Glen Golf Course, agricultural land rentals, and from residential leases (*see Attachment 3*). These two sources of funding (developers' contribution and ongoing revenue generation) cover Park development and on-going operational costs estimated in the plan. At this time, additional direct funding from the Region has not been requested; however, the Region will be undertaking in-kind contributions through the Greening Strategy for replanting and other partnership activities. Should additional funding support be requested in the future it would be subject to normal budget discussions and allocations.

Further, in the event additional funds are required for the operation and management of the Park, the Province should be requested to undertake financial involvement in order to provide for either on-going or future expansion of the regionally significant green space.

7. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Town of Richmond Hill has provided input to the development of the Oak Ridges Corridor Park Management Plan through staff and elected official representation on the Management Plan Advisory Committee. Town of Richmond Hill Council has also been asked to endorse this Management Plan. The Management Plan for the Oak Ridges Corridor Park complements on-going initiatives by the Town including the development of the Oak Ridges Community Centre facilities and additional land securement occurring east of Bayview Avenue.

8. CONCLUSION

Development of the Oak Ridges Corridor Park and the implementation of the Management Plan are consistent with a number of Regional objectives as articulated in the Greening Strategy. The Plan proposes the restoration of 428 hectares of open space on the Oak Ridges Moraine. Council endorsement of this Plan, and direction to consider support opportunities through the Greening Strategy, will further demonstrate York

Region's commitment to protecting and restoring a healthy natural heritage system for current and future generations.

For more information on this report, contact Ian Buchanan, Manager, Natural Heritage and Forestry Services, Roads Branch in the Transportation and Works Department at extension 5204.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

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