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PICKERING AIRPORT LANDS GREEN SPACE STEWARDSHIP ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report, March 31, 2004, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. This update report be received for information.
2. The Federal Government be commended for protecting part of their lands as green space and for creating the Green Space Stewardship Advisory Committee (GSSAC).
3. That the Federal Government be advised of the need for strategic infrastructure (roads, water and sewer) improvements in the medium to long term in the subject area in keeping with growth and a possible new airport.

2. PURPOSE

This report updates Committee on the protection of 7562 acres of the Federal Government airport holdings as green space. The report also outlines the content of the draft Green Space Master Plan for the lands and regional issues.

3. BACKGROUND

In May of 2002 the Government of Canada announced the Green Space Strategy to protect the federally owned portion of the Oak Ridges Moraine and areas around the Rouge Park as green space for future generations. The lands protected total 3051 hectares (7562 acres). The lands consist of approximately 2,251 hectares (5,562 acres) of the Oak Ridges Moraine located in the northern portion of the federally owned Pickering Lands Site and an additional 800 hectares (2000 acres) along the alternate Rouge Park Corridor. These lands are identified on the attached Map (*Attachment 1*). Lands in York Region are in eastern Markham along the Little Rouge Corridor running up to the Whitchurch-Stouffville border.

3.1 Green Space Stewardship Advisory Committee

The Minister also created the Green Space Stewardship Advisory Committee (GSSAC) to develop a Green Space Master Plan for the green space lands. The Committee is made up of a variety of stakeholders and is chaired by federal government staff (*see Attachment 2*). York Region's member is John Waller, Director of Long Range and Strategic Planning. The other representative from York Region is Lili Duoba, Manager of Environmental Planning from the Town of Markham.

The Committee has met a number of times to identify issues and begin to formulate a Green Space Master Plan for the area. A group of consultants headed by EDA Collaborative and Senes Consultants Ltd. have been hired by the federal government to assist in the process. Completion of a draft plan is targeted for the Fall of 2003.

On March 3, Federal staff and the consultants presented an overview of the draft plan to Planning & Economic Development Committee. The Green Space Master Plan was distributed as part of the Planning and Economic Development Agenda. Concerns raised by Planning & Economic Development Committee include: the need to recognize transportation infrastructure requirements in the area and the need to keep the area in a natural state.

3.2 Pickering Airport

In early 2002 the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA) established the Pickering Advisory Committee (PAC) and several supporting committees to advise on the preparation of Pickering Airport financial and land use plans. Transport Canada oversees this work. York Region is represented on those committees. The GTAA initiative was the subject of a staff report in April of 2003.

The Pickering Airport work includes a number of studies on the environment, transportation, land use and airport operations that may impact on the work of the GSSAC. The federal government is ensuring that these two parallel efforts are coordinated and information is shared.

3.3 Overview of the Plan

The Federal Green Space Lands – Draft Master Plan and Implementation Strategy is a long term sustainable concept plan for the 3051 hectare green space lands. The key themes are natural environment and sustainable agriculture. The Plan has several key components:

- A Ecological Management Area that proposes protection and enhancement of natural core and link areas.
- A Countryside Management Area that protects agriculture uses.
- A small Community Area for the hamlet of Altona.
- Increase in forest cover from 15% to 50%.
- A system of trails and passive recreational uses.
- Four special study areas.
- A series of 13 implementation projects.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

The Federal government should be commended on their initiatives to protect 3051 hectares (7562 acres) of their holdings as permanent green space as well as their commitment to consult with stakeholders in preparing a Green Space Master Plan for the area. These actions provide several opportunities to link with York Region's initiatives as well as several coordination issues.

4.1 Greenland Linkages

The federal commitment compliments the York Region Greenland Strategy and the Greenland System identified in the Regional Official Plan. The commitment also supports the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan and the Rouge North Plan. The protection of 3051 hectares and the possibility of renaturalization can provide strong east-west and north-south natural linkages to the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Rouge and Dufferin Creek Corridors.

4.2 Rouge Park

Approximately 800 hectares (2000 acres) between Highway 48 and the Tenth Line in Markham are part of the alternative Rouge Park Corridor. The lands abut the 600 metre reserve along the Little Rouge in south-east Markham and continue north to the Whitchurch Stouffville boundary almost adjacent to the approved Stouffville urban area.

The protection of these lands is a significant implementation of the Rouge Park North Plan. Careful balancing of environmental protection, renaturalization and agricultural activities in this area will be a key consideration in the proposed Green Space Master Plan.

4.3 Proximity to Urban Areas

The protected lands are in close proximity to the Markham Urban Area including Cornell, Swan Lake and Greensborough as well as the Stouffville Urban Area. This proximity presents some unique challenges and opportunities with regard to public access, environmental protection and trail corridors. The area is potentially a very extensive near-urban green space with significant passive recreation opportunities. Provision of trails, access, strengthening of environmental corridors and natural area protection need to be carefully considered and balanced during implementation in order to preserve the natural state of the area.

The Greenspace plan will also need to consider ongoing initiatives in Markham and Stouffville such as the Eastern Markham Strategic Review.

4.4 Transportation and Airport Coordination

As mentioned earlier, work is underway by the Greater Toronto Airports Authority (GTAA) to examine the feasibility of an airport on the Pickering Site. The Pickering Airport Site is immediately south and east of the Green Space lands. Issues related to these potential adjacent activities include: the effect of aircraft noise on adjacent uses, transportation access and wildlife/bird impact on airport operations as well as the impact of the airport on the river corridors through the site (i.e. Duffins Creek). Work of the GSSAC and the GTAA are being coordinated by the federal government staff.

York Region has planned 10 year capital road expansion projects in the area including the: Ninth Line, Major McKenzie, 16th Avenue and the Markham Bypass. In addition the York Region Transportation Master Plan identifies long term transportation projects in this area. Some of these planned facilities may require right-of-way expansions.

The principle of careful environmental planning for needed capital works is included in the Rouge North Management Plan and the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan. The Rouge North Management Plan states that “capital works are governed by the Environmental Assessment requirements. Flexibility must be maintained in the plan to ensure that the best alternatives for infrastructure are considered on the basis of environmental impacts in addition to technical and economic considerations.” (RNMP, Chapter 6, page 13)

Further, if the Pickering Airport is to proceed, traffic and the need for transportation facilities in the area can be expected to increase. In addition to this are the transportation needs of rapidly growing Regions. A careful coordinated approach to infrastructure needs in the area will be necessary and if planned appropriately can protect the natural heritage of the area.

4.5. Next Steps

The Draft Green Space Master Plan is being presented to affected municipalities during February and March of this year. A public consultation program is planned for April/May. It is intended that the Plan will then be revised and submitted to the Minister of Transport. Staff will continue to represent Regional interests through the GSSAC.

4.6 Relationship to Vision 2026

The commitment by the federal government to protect this large natural area as green space and the initiative to create Green Space Master Plan supports the “Enhanced Environment, Heritage and Culture” goal of Vision 2026. In particular the initiative will help implement several Vision 2026 action areas including: Securing a Green York Region, Ensuring Clean Water and Air, and Promoting Conservation.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications for the Region. The Federal program compliments the Region’s Greening and Land Securement Strategies.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

The Federal initiative compliments the Rouge Park North Plan and helps implement the natural heritage system in the Town of Markham. Staff have been carefully coordinating with Markham representatives on the GSSAC. Staff have also coordinated with Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville staff.

7. CONCLUSION

In 2002 Federal Government announced that 3051 hectares (7562 acres) in the Pickering/Markham land assembly would be protected as green space for future generations. A Draft Green Space Master Plan has now been completed.

This Federal action is to be commended and supports the Region's Greening Strategy, the Oak Ridges Moraine Plan and the Rouge Park North Plan. It is key that needed transportation system improvements be recognized to service growing regions and a potential Pickering Airport.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.

(A copy of the attachments referred to in the foregoing is included with this report and is also on file in the Office of the Regional Clerk.)