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NATURAL HERITAGE DISCUSSION PAPER – 2007

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 March 28, 2007, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services, be adopted:**

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. Regional Council receive the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper included as *Attachment No. 1*.
2. That the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper be distributed to Local Municipalities, Regional partners and stakeholders for their comments by June 15, 2007.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this staff report is to present Regional Committee and Council with the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper. The discussion paper is intended to stimulate conversation with our stakeholders on updating our natural heritage system and strategy. York Region has faced significant growth over the past 25 years. This growth will continue and has the potential to place considerable additional pressure on the Region's natural heritage system.

Ensuring a strong, robust natural heritage system integrated into the new communities of York Region, and enhanced and restored in the Region's intensifying urban areas will help ensure the long term health of the system and contribute to a sustainable York Region.

3. BACKGROUND

On March 29, 2007, Regional Council approved Clause 6 of Report 3 of the Planning and Economic Development Committee dealing with the “Growth Management Strategy Options” report. That report provided an overview of the components of the Region’s Growth Management Strategy that will be presented to Regional Council over the next few months. Among the further reports identified was the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper.

Regional Planning and Economic Development Committee considered a number of growth management related reports at their meeting of April 4, 2007. The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper continues the series of reports related to growth management.

3.1 Initiatives leading to the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper

3.1.1 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* 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 no. 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 is 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.

3.1.2 Sustainability Strategy

The Sustainability Strategy will provide an innovative framework for smarter, better decision making. It will be the lens through which all corporate initiatives and new policy initiatives will be examined.

The Sustainability Strategy demonstrates the Region's commitment to a Sustainable approach to the growth challenges ahead. As "Sustainable Natural Environment" is one of the core tenants of sustainability, the health of our natural heritage system is integral to ensuring overall sustainability, providing an inherent connection between the Sustainability Strategy and the future of natural heritage planning.



3.1.3 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.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Since the original Greenlands system was identified in 1994 there have been a number of provincial initiatives, including the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, the Greenbelt Plan, the 2005 Provincial Policy Statement, as well as the TRCA and LSRCA natural heritage studies which have refined and focussed natural heritage systems planning in the Region. The challenge ahead lies in coordinating these policies and initiatives to ensure a comprehensive approach to natural heritage system and strategy; ensuring a connected system within the whitebelt, and integrating natural heritage and infrastructure.

The Natural Heritage Discussion paper addresses several issues, including:

- updating the Regional Natural Heritage System (Greenlands System) with the addition of Significant Woodlands;
- incorporating the Greenbelt Plan into the Regional Official Plan (ROP);
- establishing the principles for a linked natural heritage system of cores and corridors across the Region;
- natural heritage system within the white belt areas of York Region;
- establishing a conceptual trail network within the Greenlands system;
- more fully integrating infrastructure planning, design and construction with natural heritage principles; and

- updating the Region's Greening Strategy.

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper examines the current Greenlands System, the emerging policy context for Natural Heritage planning, and identifies 8 action areas for charting a new path in natural heritage planning for York Region.

4.1 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 3 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.

4.2 Natural Heritage Action Areas

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper, appended to this report as *Attachment 1* is organized around 5 principles and has identified 8 Action Areas for implementation. The 8 Action Areas are the key implementation areas for ensuring a comprehensive strategy for protecting and enhancing the Region's natural heritage.

NATURAL HERITAGE ACTION AREAS:

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

These action areas are intended to take York Region to the next level in Natural Heritage planning and protection.

4.3 Next Steps

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper will be circulated widely to the Local Municipalities, Regional partners, and stakeholders and will also be made available at the Growth Management Phase 2 Town Hall meetings throughout May 2007. Comments will be requested by June 15, 2007.

The results of the comments on the Discussion Paper will be brought back to Planning and Economic Development Committee and Regional Council in the Fall of 2007.

4.4. Relationship to Vision 2026

The Natural Heritage Discussion 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 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 will be distributed to Local Municipalities.

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 is intended to stimulate conversation and inform a new approach to natural heritage planning as we plan to accommodate the growth forecasted by the Province.

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. It is recommended that this discussion paper be circulated widely to stimulate the discussion and that staff undertakes focussed stakeholder input. A report on the consultations will be brought back to Committee and Council in the fall.

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 attachment referred to in this clause is attached to this report.)