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YORK REGION NATURAL HERITAGE TRAILS CONCEPT STUDY

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendations contained in the following report dated May 15, 2007, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

1. This report on the proposed York Region Natural Heritage Trails Concept Study be received.
2. That the consulting firm Marshall Macklin Monaghan be retained to undertake this study.
3. Copies of this report be forwarded by the Regional Clerk to the Clerks of the local municipalities in York Region for comment.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this staff report is to report on the commencement of the York Region Natural Heritage Trails Concept Study.

3. BACKGROUND

York Region has a history of taking a comprehensive view towards natural heritage system planning.

The Regional Official Plan in the early 1990's established a linked greenlands concept for the Region. In 2001, Regional Council adopted the Regional Greenlands Property Securement Strategy and has funded this program and established the Securement Coordination Committee to help co-ordinate securement efforts among the Region's partners to most effectively leverage resources.

In 2002, Vision 2026 also re-inforced the promotion of a permanent linked greenlands system as an action area.

On May 24, 2007, Regional Council received the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper which is intended to stimulate discussion and provide the ground work for the creation of an updated linked natural heritage system for York Region

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper is organized around 5 principles and has identified 8 Action Areas for implementation to ensure protection and enhancement of the Region's natural heritage. Action 6 in this list is to establish a regional trail network.

A key balance that needs to be established on natural heritage lands is that between natural protection/enhancement and human use. Many of our natural heritage systems are spread around the Region without links for human use.

A system of connected natural heritage trails would help to create connections between existing natural heritage areas, and compliment the trail and natural heritage work of the local municipalities, as well as allowing residents and visitors alike to explore and experience our natural heritage and in doing so, will not only provide a healthy, sustainable form of recreation and transportation, it will also provide an opportunity to educate and inform trail users on the Region's unique natural heritage features and wildlife, and in turn, this awareness will help to support and build on the Region's, local municipal and partner agencies' efforts to further protect and enhance our natural environment.

3.1 Initiatives related to the York Region Natural Heritage Trails Study

3.1.1 Transportation Master Plan Update

The Region is currently undertaking an updated Transportation Master Plan which is taking a "triple bottom-line" approach to ensure balance between the economic and social benefits of transportation with the need to protect the environment. The Transportation Master Plan is committed to providing a range of accessible alternative transportation and active community living options for all users towards creating more liveable, sustainable communities that serve to enhance and protect the natural environment around them.

3.1.2 Pedestrian and Cycling Master Plan Study

The Region is also undertaking a Pedestrian and Cycling Master Plan Study. This study strives to provide a guide to improving both the pedestrian and cycling environment that supports and promotes alternative modes of active transportation, resulting in more liveable, walkable communities. The plan's focus is on the creation of an integrated cycling and pedestrian network throughout the Region for commuting purposes, connecting municipalities and linking to transit terminals and bus stops, mainly through the provision of on-street and off-street pedestrian and cycling infrastructure within the Regional road allowance and within the context of commuter cycling and walking. The Pedestrian & Cycling Master Plan focus is for on street right of ways.

A Region wide Natural Heritage Trails network is not intended to duplicate the regional pedestrian and cycling network. Rather, it is intended to link existing natural trails as well as to explore opportunities to provide new trails in the natural heritage area as a way to provide a connection for residents and visitors to York Region's natural heritage features.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Under the Province's new planning context, the Places to Grow and Greenbelt Plans mean that York Region will be facing significant growth pressures within a limited "whitebelt" area, that is, the areas for growth that remain outside of our intensifying urban areas and the protected areas of the Greenbelt. While the whitebelt is blessed with extensive natural systems, growth in this area has the potential to place increasing pressure on the Region's natural systems in order to accommodate forecasted population, jobs, and the necessary human services and infrastructure.

York Region has approved planning policy and implemented programs to design this growth in a more sustainable way.

Now is the right time to begin a fresh approach to natural heritage planning in York Region.

York Region is blessed with a number of trails, both on and off-road. The area municipalities are very active in providing many of these trails. There are also a number of organizations involved in providing trails in the Region including the Province's Nokiidaa Trail System that links Aurora, Newmarket and East Gwillimbury and the Oak Ridges Moraine Trail being developed by the Oak Ridges Trail Association.

The concept of a *connected*, Regional natural heritage trails system has been suggested by stakeholders and residents in consultations on a number of current Regional initiatives being undertaken as part of the Region's Growth Management Strategy under the umbrella of the York Region Sustainability Strategy.

There is, however, no overall natural trails concept plan for the Region in place.

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper, calls for the establishment of a Regional Trail Network as Action #6 and states that:

"A regional trail system that connects local municipal trail systems, provides residents with the opportunity to experience the natural heritage system throughout York Region. The Region currently promotes public use of these amenities through a number of different programs including the "Take a Walk Through the Forest" program that includes hikes led by naturalists and others as well as the creation of the "Take A Hike Trail Guide" that was developed by the Region in association with Local Municipalities and Conservation Authorities."

It also states:

"In recognition of these important connections between health, and livable communities, the Region will undertake a study to define a Regional Trail

connected through the Region's Natural Heritage System, and to existing regional and inter-regional trails."

The intent of this study is to determine the role of the Region in regional trail planning and development, develop a set of objectives to guide the study as well as appropriate trail route selection criteria for new trails; and identify potential additions/improvements to the existing regional trail system.

As mentioned in Section 3.1.3 of this Report, the Region is preparing a Regional Pedestrian and Cycling Master Plan Study that is intended to improving both the pedestrian and cycling environment that supports and promotes alternative modes of active transportation, resulting in more liveable, walkable communities. The plan's focus is on the creation of an integrated cycling and pedestrian network throughout the Region for commuting purposes, connecting municipalities and linking to transit terminals and bus stops.

A Region-wide Natural Heritage Trails concept would compliment the regional pedestrian and cycling network. It is intended to link existing natural trails as well as to explore opportunities to provide new trails in the natural heritage area as a way to provide a connection for residents and visitors to York Region's natural heritage features.

It is staff's recommendation that the same consultant, Marshall Macklin Monaghan, that is currently undertaking the Region's Transportation Master Plan Update as well as the Pedestrian and Cycling Master Plan undertake York Region Natural Trails Concept Study without going to competition.

The reason for recommending sole sourcing this project is that it is very closely related to the work they are currently undertaking for the Region's Pedestrian and Cycling Master Plan. Further, the consultant has extensive experience in this type of study throughout Ontario. In addition, there is an advantage to having a compatible approach to the work completed for the Pedestrian & Cycling Master Plan. A summary of the scope of work in the draft proposal is presented below.

4.1 Natural Heritage Trails Study - Scope of Work

This study represents the first stages of developing a Regional Natural Heritage Trail Concept. The study team will be working in consultation with stakeholders, interest groups, local municipalities and conservation authorities to establish a conceptual trail network within the Region's Natural Heritage System.

Working with Regional staff, the Marshall Macklin Monaghan study team have developed a Vision and Objectives to guide this initial study. The following outlines the scope of the draft Terms of Reference for the study:

Vision:

“To create a regional trail system that connects local municipal trail systems, provides residents with the opportunity to experience the natural heritage system throughout York Region.”

Objectives:

1. Through consultation with selected stakeholder groups, develop a natural heritage trail route selection and evaluation criteria matrix for new trails. The matrix would incorporate input received from the initial round of stakeholder meetings consultations and would be based on a hierarchy of trail types and account for natural and heritage features as well as the range of trail users that are proposed to be accommodated.
2. Identify and digitally map candidate natural heritage trail route alignments and corresponding natural heritage features.
3. Present it as the draft York Regional Natural Heritage Trails Concept Plan for final consultation.
4. Document study findings in a concise draft report that:
 - Summarizes the Study;
 - Clearly documents the stakeholder consultations;
 - Proposes a Natural Heritage Trail Evaluation Criteria Matrix that could be used for future field investigations of trails routes proposed in the Study;
 - Illustrates a conceptual region-wide trail network of existing and proposed local trails and major regional trails that together could form a comprehensive region-wide natural heritage trail system;
 - Presents some of the natural heritage features associated with the trail routes proposed in the draft network concept;
 - Comments on the York Region's role in trail design and development based on consultation and jurisdictional review;
 - Suggests an approach for the Region, Local Municipalities, Conservation Authorities and Trail organizations to work together as partners to implement the network concept; and
 - Recommends a funding strategy including potential funding sources and partnerships.
5. Determine the role the Region should have in regional trail planning and development.
6. Identify possible next steps by the Region and its partners including implementation mechanisms.

4.2 Timing and Next Steps

The Natural Heritage Trails Concept Study will commence in June 2007, and a staff report presenting the findings is anticipated later in the Fall. At that time, staff will recommend a series of next steps towards establishing a Natural Heritage Trail System.

4.3 Relationship to Vision 2026

This study will help to further implement the Vision 2026 action areas of promoting a permanent linked greenlands system, and balancing growth with the environment.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The cost of the Natural Heritage Trails Study is being undertaken by Marshall Macklin Monaghan on behalf of the Region at a cost of \$41,010.08 inclusive of GST.

This study is being done within existing budget under the Greenlands Securement Strategy.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Local Municipalities are considered key stakeholders in this study. The current proposals calls for meetings with local municipal staff responsible for trails and natural heritage.

7. CONCLUSION

The Region is facing significant growth that has the potential to place increasing pressure on the Region's natural systems. York Region is committed to planning for this growth in a more sustainable way.

York Region has a history of taking a comprehensive view towards natural heritage system planning.

The Regional Official Plan in the early 1990's established a linked greenlands concept for the Region. In 2001, Regional Council adopted the Regional Greenlands Property Securement Strategy and has funded this program and established the Securement Coordination Committee to help co-ordinate securement efforts among the Region's partners to most effectively leverage resources.

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The York Region Natural Heritage Discussion Paper calls for the establishment of a Regional Trail Network.

It is staff's recommendation that the Natural Heritage Trails Concept Study be completed with the assistance of a consultant.

For more information on this report contact Laura Atkins-Paul, extension 1534, Senior Planner, Long Range and Strategic Planning Branch.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.