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REPORT OF THE GREENBELT TASK FORCE AND PROTECTION OF RIVER SYSTEMS - ADDENDUM REPORT

The Planning and Economic Development Committee recommends the adoption of the recommendation contained in the following report, October 1, 2004, from the Commissioner of Planning and Development Services:

1. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that:

1. This report be forwarded to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to re-iterate previous Regional Council comments on the Report of the Greenbelt Task Force and to the Minister of Public Infrastructure and Renewal for his information in preparing the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to reiterate the importance of river systems in the proposed Greenbelt and to provide an update to Committee and Council on responses from area municipal Councils to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing on the Discussion Paper of the Greenbelt Task Force. The preparation of this report was directed by Council at its meeting of September 23, 2004.

3. BACKGROUND

Regional Council at its meeting of June 24, 2004 received and endorsed Clause 10 of Report 6 of the Regional Planning and Economic Development Committee providing comments on the then recently released Discussion Paper on the Greenbelt Protection Plan. The comments and recommendations contained in this report formed the basis of the Region's submission to the Greenbelt Task Force, which was due prior to July 16, 2004.

More recently, Regional Council at its meeting of September 23, 2004 received Clause 11 of Report 7 of the Regional Planning and Economic Development Committee for information purposes. This report summarized the recommendations that the Greenbelt Task Force submitted to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing in August.

Regional Council at its meeting of September 23, 2004, following discussion on the above report, directed staff to prepare an addendum report to discuss the importance of river systems, including the Rouge River in the proposed Greenbelt.

4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS

Since, the introduction of the *Greenbelt Protection Act, 2003* last December, the Greenbelt Task Force and Provincial staff and Ministers have been working at an accelerated pace to prepare the Greenbelt Protection Plan for the Province. This pace is necessary to meet the legislated sunset date of the Greenbelt Protection Act in December 2004.

4.1 Greenbelt Discussion Paper - Environmental Protection

The Discussion paper advocated a “systems approach” to natural heritage and water resources by providing linkages between the Niagara Escarpment, Oak Ridges Moraine and major river and valley systems and protecting and improving water resources systems including the identification and protection of source areas and riparian corridors. Specific natural heritage elements identified in the Discussion Paper included “wetlands, kettle lakes, rare and threatened animals, and plants and habitat as well as river and valley systems” and identified the importance of a network of open spaces including Bronte Creek Provincial Park, the Rouge Park and the Duffins Rouge Agricultural Preserve.

In June 2004, Regional Council made the following recommendation regarding environmental protection:

“The Region advise the Task Force that the Greenbelt components are well defined and secured in York Region with the Official Plan policies, Oak Ridges Moraine Official Plan changes, Regional/local Greenlands systems & north-south river valleys and should be maintained;

The areas of natural heritage that could be considered for improved policy protection and securement tools are:

- *wetlands (other than Provincially significant wetlands)*
- *tableland woodlands and*
- *those middle reaches of streams off the ORM*

In those areas, Provincial policy is not of sufficient strength (either in the existing PPS or the draft PPS currently under review) to secure or otherwise protect them from development and site alteration or from expansion of Agricultural uses.”

Regional Council’s recommendation supports the protection of all eight north-south river systems draining to Lakes Simcoe and Ontario within the Region as integral parts of the proposed Greenbelt and advises the Task Force and the Province that there is a need for additional protection of certain features within the Region regardless of the watershed or municipality in which they occur. Specifically, Regional Council indicated that tableland woodlots, wetland areas and the middle reaches of rivers and streams off the Moraine deserve more protection than is currently afforded through existing plans and the Provincial Policy Statement. Should the Province choose to take the Region’s advice, then the Rouge River and all other rivers would see increased protection along their vulnerable middle reaches.

While the implementation details and specifics of the Greenbelt Plan remain ambiguous, it is anticipated that the Province will need to rely on the very good policy work undertaken in a number of regional and area municipal documents over the past few years to assist in implementing the Greenbelt Plan. For example, the principles found in the Rouge North Management Plan could provide a starting point for identifying areas required for protection and policies within this system.

4.2 Greenbelt Task Force Advice and Recommendations to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, August 2004

The Task Force has recommended that the Province observe the following principles in deciding which lands should to be included:

- Lands that are already permanently protected by easements or owned by Charitable trusts or lands in Public ownership.
- Lands in which the Province has previously indicated an interest, including additions to the Niagara Escarpment, the tender fruit lands in Niagara and all portions of the Holland Marsh speciality crop area.
- Some Provincially owned lands subject to suitability for inclusion.

In addition, in discussing other issues areas, the Task Force also identified other features which should become part of the Greenbelt including:

- Provincially Significant/Major natural heritage and hydrological features such as the Oak Ridges Moraine, Niagara Escarpment and the Rouge Valley and connections between these major features such as river valleys linking to lakes Ontario and Simcoe.
- Potentially other features such as glacial lake shorelines.

Regional staff noted in the September report to Council that while the basic environmental protection recommendations are still intact (including mention of the Rouge River and other north-south stream systems), Regional comments to the Task Force in June 2004 recommended additional areas where Provincial policy requires strengthening (wetlands, middle reaches of rivers and streams and tableland woodlots). It was recommended at the September 2004 Council meeting that the issues be again raised with the Ministry for consideration. The Regional Clerk has acted on this direction.

The Task Force recommendations to the Minister speak very clearly to the inclusion of lands in Public ownership and Provincially owned lands where appropriate into the Greenbelt. There is no clarification of what the Province means by “where appropriate” however one expects that in reviewing land suitability the Province would acknowledge place weight and importance on the recommendations of regional and local planning documents. For example, in the Town of Markham, the East Markham Strategic Review as well as the Rouge North Management Plan provide direction for lands that should be protected and given the significant Federal and Provincial land holdings in the east Markham area one would expect that the Province would be amenable to assisting in implementation of the Greenbelt Plan by ensuring that these Provincial holdings became part of the protected Greenbelt.

4.3 Area Municipal Comments on the Greenbelt Task Force Discussion Paper and Report of the Greenbelt Task Force

Eight of the nine area municipalities in the Region have considered reports discussing the proposed Greenbelt Plan to their Committees and Council. There is considerable agreement among area municipalities regarding the need to link the Growth Management Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the Transportation Plan into the Greenbelt exercise (or vice versa), since they are linked to each other.

Most municipalities also referenced specific initiatives on-going or completed at the municipal level for the Greenbelt Task Force (or the Province) to consider in establishing the "Greenbelt". For example, the Town of Markham referenced initiatives to establish a linked natural heritage system and the Eastern Markham Strategic Review while the Township of King referenced the King Natural Features Study completed as part of the background work to their Rural Plan.

The Ministry of Municipal Affairs is aware of these Regional and local initiatives and will hopefully consider them and balance their objectives with provincial aims when the Greenbelt Plan is released and the implementation mechanisms are developed.

4.4 Next Steps

The Province has been reviewing the Task Force submissions since late August and in addition has held discussions with many stakeholders to obtain further information. Provincial staff has recently advised that a draft of the Greenbelt Plan is anticipated by the middle of October, 2004.

Further consultation opportunities have not yet been finalized, but are expected to coincide with the release of the draft plan. The *Greenbelt Protection Act, 2003* is still slated to lapse on of December 16, 2004 and the Government still intends to have the Greenbelt Plan approved by that time.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

No announcements regarding special financial arrangements to assist in implementing the Greenbelt Plan have been made however, the Task Force did recommend that the Province allocate sufficient resources to assist municipalities in implementation.

Regardless however, if the Provincial Greenbelt Plan is to be incorporated into municipal planning documents, then Regional staff will proceed, although the costs of implementation are unknown at this time.

6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT

Area municipalities in the Region have received copies of the Discussion Paper as well as the report of the Greenbelt Task Force. The Towns of Markham, Georgina, East

Gwillimbury, Aurora, Newmarket, the City of Vaughan and the Township of King have provided reports to their Committee and Council on Bill 27, the Greenbelt Task Force Discussion paper or the Report of the Task Force to the Minister. Whitchurch-Stouffville Council will consider a report on this issue on October 19, 2004.

7. CONCLUSION

Both the Discussion Paper released by the Greenbelt Task Force in May and the Task Force recommendations to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing in August stressed the importance of linkages between natural features, north south river valleys and identified the Rouge Park by name.

From a Regional perspective, all eight River systems within the Region provide important linkages which should be integral to the Greenbelt. The Region's comments to the Task Force in July identified the importance of environmental protection and recommended improvements of the policy context for wetlands, tableland woodlots and middle reaches of streams draining north and south off the Oak Ridges Moraine. These recommendations will be re-iterated to the Ministry through the September 23, 2004 report (Clause 11 of Report 7).

Area Municipal comments reviewed by Regional staff identified a range of local initiatives that should be considered by the Province when drafting the Greenbelt Plan and, also addressed and generally supported, the larger issues relating to growth management, transportation and infrastructure identified in the Region's submissions to the Task Force.

Neither the Greenbelt Plan nor its implementation mechanisms have been finalized, however it is hoped that the Province considers and balances Regional and area municipal perspectives and Provincial perspectives in drafting the Plan and its implementation strategy.

It is recommended that this addendum report be forwarded to the Ministry as well as the previous reports.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.