

# The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole  
Planning and Economic Development  
June 11, 2020

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

## Regional Official Plan Natural Systems Planning Background Report

### 1. Recommendation

1. Regional Clerk forward this report and attachments to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the local municipalities and local conservation authorities.

### 2. Summary

This report and attachments introduce the approach to updating natural systems (natural heritage system and water resource system) as part of the Regional Official Plan (ROP) update. Updated natural systems mapping and policy direction will be included in the draft ROP anticipated within the first half of 2021.

Key Points:

- York Region has a long history of natural systems planning; current policies provide a strong foundation and some are considered leading examples of natural systems planning within the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH)
- The Province released Provincial Natural Heritage System (NHS) mapping for the GGH and updated policy direction through the coordinated provincial plan review that require conformity through the Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR)
- This report outlines the approach for updating Official Plan policies and mapping that builds on the strong existing ROP natural systems policy and mapping framework and ensures conformity with provincial plans
- In addition to Provincial NHS mapping, the Region is reviewing all natural feature and systems mapping in the ROP against most recent data available
- Staff will consult with local municipalities, stakeholders and the public on proposed mapping and policy changes in advance of a draft ROP

### 3. Background

#### **York Region places significant emphasis on protection of natural systems through its Greenlands System**

Natural systems include the water resource system and natural heritage system, as described in Table 1. The features of these systems are complementary, may overlap, and function together. The Regional Greenlands is a connected system of protected natural heritage features, land and water systems that ensure animal and plant species and their natural environment thrive. Since the 1994 ROP, Regional Council has placed significant emphasis on identification, protection, restoration and enhancement of the Region's natural systems, including wetlands, woodlands, lakes and streams. The existing ROP focuses on strengthening and connecting the Regional Greenlands System through enhancement and restoration of the system.

**Table 1**  
**Components of Natural Systems**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Water Resource System	Permanent and intermittent streams Lakes Highly vulnerable aquifers Wetlands
Natural Heritage System	Woodlands Wildlife habitat Fish habitat Wetlands (ecological functions)

#### **The Province has provided updated direction on natural systems planning policies and mapping since the current Official Plan was approved**

Since 2010, updated provincial direction has come into effect in the form of Provincial Policy Statement (2020), Growth Plan (2019), Greenbelt Plan (2017) and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (2017). In addition to updated policy direction, the Province introduced NHS mapping for the Growth Plan. York Region is required to incorporate this provincial mapping, subject to refinements, and apply appropriate policies in the Official Plan to maintain, restore, or enhance the diversity and connectivity of the system. In addition to the requirement to incorporate the Provincial NHS mapping, the draft ROP will refine existing

natural system mapping (including wetlands and woodlands) where more recent information is available.

Other notable provincial direction updates include strengthened policy language for water resource system which aligns with other legislation such as source water protection, new Urban River Valley policies and identification of key hydrologic areas (i.e. significant groundwater recharge areas, highly vulnerable aquifers and significant surface water contribution areas).

## 4. Analysis

### **Official Plan policy and mapping updates will build on the existing comprehensive natural systems policy framework**

A detailed review of current ROP policies against the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), Growth Plan, Greenbelt Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan related to natural systems indicates strong alignment with provincial direction. Updates to natural systems policy will build on the existing comprehensive Official Plan policy framework. The Region is working with partner conservation authorities and local municipalities to include best available information to inform policy updates and mapping requirements. Key provincial policy changes and proposed ROP actions are contained within Attachment 1. Given current ROP policies' strong alignment with provincial direction, many of the updates are minor in nature, requiring updates to existing ROP language for consistency.

To achieve conformity with provincial policy direction, staff are undertaking the following to inform the draft ROP:

- Update existing Official Plan mapping to reflect provincial direction and best available information
- Refine, where appropriate, and implement Provincial NHS mapping
- Review and update ROP policy and language to improve consistency and alignment with provincial policy
- Update ROP definitions to conform to new provincial plans

### **York Region's Natural Heritage System mapping shows strong alignment with provincial natural heritage mapping**

The new Provincial Growth Plan NHS mapping for the GGH excludes lands inside of settlement area boundaries that were approved and in effect as of July 1, 2017, and policies are intended to provide consistent and long-term protection of the natural system throughout the GGH.

Preliminary analysis of Regional Greenlands System compared to Growth Plan NHS mapping confirms over 90% alignment (Attachment 2). The mapping includes areas across the Growth Plan, Greenbelt and Oak Ridges Moraine plan areas. The Growth Plan allows

upper-tier municipalities to refine provincial mapping of the NHS at the time of initial implementation into their official plans. After initial implementation, further refinements to Provincial NHS mapping can be made through an MCR.

Within settlement areas, the Growth Plan and PPS defer the identification and protection of natural heritage features and areas to municipalities. Regional staff support this flexible and collaborative approach to finalizing natural systems mapping as it will result in achieving provincial requirements, reflect current environmental studies and take into account local circumstances and stakeholder input. Several of the Region's local municipalities are currently undertaking Official Plan reviews and when completed, locally identified natural heritage systems will be incorporated into the ROP.

### **Refinements to existing ROP natural systems mapping are minor in nature**

In addition to the Provincial NHS mapping, the Region is reviewing and updating all natural systems mapping in the ROP where updated information is available. Attachment 2 maps updated information for the key natural heritage features, key hydrologic features and key hydrologic areas. These maps illustrate the extent of potential changes that may be included in draft ROP mapping. Updated information comes from provincial and conservation authority data and reflects new provincial policy. Updated mapping methodologies allow for more precision when delineating the natural system.

Attachment 3 provides preliminary analysis of differences between current ROP mapping and new information showing differences in land area. While most natural system features and areas have minor areas of discrepancy, others may appear more substantive. For example, updated Significant Groundwater Recharge Area mapping appear to be a substantive change, but these features are currently protected through the Region's source water protection plans. The updated mapping brings the ROP into alignment with existing source water protection plans and policy approaches.

The ROP recognizes and protects water systems and key hydrologic functions primarily from a source water protection perspective and maps key hydrologic features. Provincial plans now require municipalities to identify a water resource system informed by watershed planning that is comprised of key hydrologic features and areas. The majority of the key hydrologic features and areas are recognized in the existing ROP, however new policies will be required to conform to the added component of significant surface water contribution areas. Any major development proposed in these areas will be subject to further assessment to demonstrate how hydrologic functions of these areas are protected. This approach is consistent with ROP policies for other key hydrologic areas such as highly vulnerable aquifers and significant groundwater recharge areas.

### **Consultation on proposed mapping and policy changes to the natural and agricultural system will be completed together in advance of the draft ROP**

Meetings have been held with conservation authority and local municipal staff to review potential mapping changes and seek input. Regional staff will continue discussions with local municipalities and conservation authority staff to finalize draft ROP mapping and proposed updated policies for natural systems. Staff also continue to consult on the proposed

agriculture system, as outlined in the [June 2019](#) report, alongside the natural systems component of the MCR, recognizing policies and mapping for both are interrelated and an overlap with interested stakeholders. Additionally, staff will engage the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee and the Planning Advisory Committee as many natural systems features and areas intersect within the agricultural system.

### **Staff will report back with proposed mapping and draft policy framework through the draft ROP**

Staff continue to advance technical mapping and policy work on natural systems planning. Discussions with local municipal planning and conservation staff are ongoing toward completion of draft mapping. Staff will report back to Council with draft natural systems mapping and policies, anticipated within the first half of 2021 with the draft ROP. Public and stakeholder consultation will continue to help confirm accuracy of the current policy framework and mapping.

## **5. Financial**

Background work for refinement of the natural system policies and mapping is being undertaken within the existing staff complement and budget of the Planning and Economic Development Branch.

## **6. Local Impact**

Local municipalities and conservation authorities are key partners in protection and enhancement of York Region's natural system. In addition to consultation efforts identified above, Regional staff have asked local municipalities to provide natural system mapping related comments that will be considered in the updated mapping for the draft ROP. Staff will continue working with them on refining mapping and policies throughout the ROP update.

## **7. Conclusion**

Provincial plans require the Region to implement the natural system through updated policy and mapping. Existing ROP policies and mapping provide comprehensive protection of the Region's natural systems; updates are required to conform to provincial plans. Staff will update existing ROP natural systems mapping and policy framework to meet conformity requirements. Continued engagement with local municipalities, conservation authorities and stakeholders will occur throughout the process of policy and mapping updates. Natural systems preliminary mapping and policy directions will be presented to Council in advance of public consultation in the first half of 2021.

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For more information on this report, please contact Sandra Malcic, Director, Long Range Planning at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 75724. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.

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Attachments (3)  
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