



Office of the Commissioner  
Environmental Services Department

## MEMORANDUM

To: Members of Committee of the Whole

From: Erin Mahoney, M. Eng.  
Commissioner of Environmental Services

Date: August 24, 2021

Re: Acquisition of Land – 20753 McCowan Road and 4762 Queensville Sideroad, East Gwillimbury

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### **The Region has acquired 142 hectares of land to expand the York Regional Forest**

This memorandum is to inform Council that the Region acquired lands under Delegated Authority 2018-51, located at 20753 McCowan Road and 4762 Queensville Sideroad, Town of East Gwillimbury (Attachment 1). The purchase was authorized under Delegated Authority to meet the timelines negotiated in Agreement of Purchase and Sale. The lands, shown on the map in Attachment 2, were acquired through the Regional Greening Strategy to be operated as part of the York Regional Forest.

#### Key Points:

- The Environmental Land Protection and Preservation Program has been in place since 2001 to support opportunities to protect and restore the Regional Greenlands System
- The 142 hectare (350 acre) parcel is located within the Greenbelt Plan, being part of the Natural Heritage System and part of the Oak Ridges Moraine Natural Core area
- Evaluated against Council approved Regional Securement Criteria, this property was deemed a high priority for acquisition when considering natural heritage significance, reforestation potential, cost and contribution to passive recreation opportunities
- Approximately 82 hectares will be reforested, contributing to the Region's 25% woodland cover target
- Purchase of the property was funded through existing Land Securement Reserve funds, established in 2001 as part of the Greening Strategy, to fund Strategy programs including land conservation

- Acquisition and reforestation of this parcel will be partially funded (40%) through Infrastructure Canada's Disaster Mitigation and Adaption Fund and is key to meeting deliverables and timelines set out in that funding agreement

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role natural spaces provide in the lives of our residents. With many activities reduced or suspended due to public health measures, residents have sought opportunities to explore natural areas, including the York Regional Forest. This expansion to the Forest will provide much needed additional natural space for our residents.

### **The Environmental Land Protection and Preservation Program is an important means to protect the natural environment and build sustainable communities**

The Region continues to demonstrate environmental leadership by implementing the Greening Strategy and investing in green infrastructure. In 2021, \$1.94 million was budgeted to deliver Greening Strategy programs (tree planting, environmental education, stewardship, etc.) including protecting and restoring Natural Heritage features through the Environmental Land Protection and Preservation Program.

A total of 1,376 hectares of environmentally significant lands (valued at over \$103 million) have been protected since adoption of the Greening Strategy in 2001. Lands have been protected either directly by the Region or by providing support to Conservation partners. Securement Criteria endorsed by Council in [January 2004](#) provide direction for securement of lands, prioritizing lands with environmental benefits including opportunities to increase woodland cover.

### **York Region was successful in obtaining Infrastructure Canada funding for natural infrastructure through the Disaster Mitigation and Adaptation Fund**

In May 2019, Infrastructure Canada approved the Region's application for a natural infrastructure project. Valued at \$25 million, this project seeks to mitigate the impacts of extreme heat and flooding through the planting of over 400,000 trees in urban and rural areas, including the acquisition and reforestation of 100 hectares of land. Through the Federal Disaster Mitigation and Adaption Fund (DMAF) Infrastructure Canada will provide \$10.1 million in funding over eight years to the project.

Acquisition of this property will significantly contribute to the Natural Infrastructure project deliverables. Through this project 40% of the land acquisition and tree planting costs will be funded by Infrastructure Canada (Private Attachment 1).

### **The property is within the Regional Greenlands System, Oak Ridges Moraine and the Natural Heritage System of the Greenbelt Plan**

The 142 hectare property is located within the Natural Heritage system of the Greenbelt Plan, designated as Protected Countryside, contains portion of the Oak Ridges Moraine Natural Core area and is part of the Regional Greenlands System. The property provides a significant

opportunity to increase woodland cover through reforestation of 82 hectares of land contributing to our 25% woodland cover target.

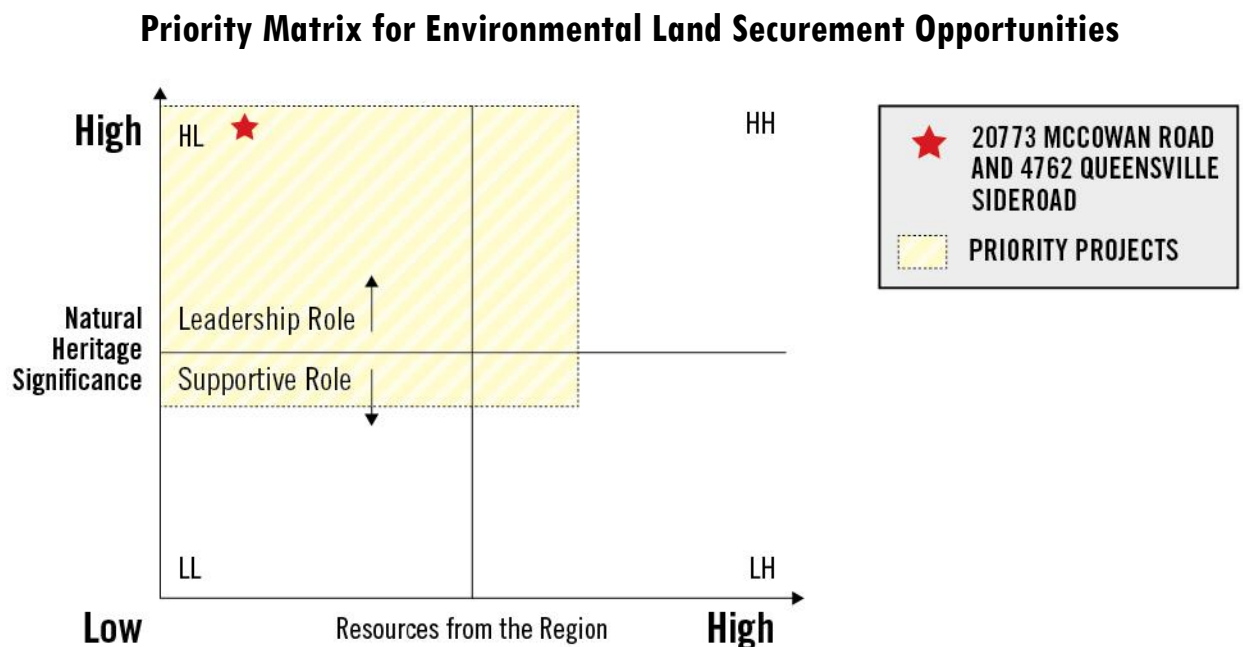
The property is located outside prime agricultural area and is designated as Rural Policy Area under the Regional Official Plan. Environmental due diligence is underway; Phase 1 Environmental Site Assessment have been completed and some further soil and groundwater investigation work is in progress. If any significant environmental issues are found, staff will report back to Council as part of the 2021 Greening Strategy Achievements report (delivered in early 2022) with mitigation measures.

Current agricultural use will be phased out as lands are restored. The acquisition of this property will allow York Region to increase public access to green space, expand existing trail systems and enhance the opportunity for residents to connect with nature. While approved funding, including DMAF, will be used to advance these objectives, additional funding for some of this work will be included as part of the 2022 proposed capital budget.

### The property ranked highly in evaluation against Council approved land securement criteria

The Region’s Internal Evaluation Team, composed of Senior Legal, Finance and Planning staff, reviewed and evaluated this opportunity against the Council approved Regional Securement Criteria and deemed it a high priority for acquisition (Figure 1).

Figure 1



Characteristics of the property provide high compatibility with the Council endorsed criteria of the Environmental Land Protection and Preservation Program. The main opportunities and values include:

- Potential reforestation of 82 hectares that will contribute to the York Region woodland cover target of 25 per cent
- Protecting significant woodlands and enhancing ecological functions (relating to natural features size, shape and connectivity)
- Wildlife habitat and opportunities to improve biodiversity (e.g. wetland and forest habitats)
- Increase public access, passive recreation (i.e. trails) and environmental education

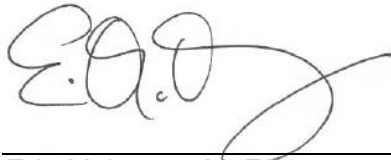
When considering a project, the Natural Heritage significance is assessed along with other benefits and the financial cost in a priority matrix. In this case, the Natural Heritage and passive recreation opportunity values are very high and the property was appraised as fair market value (Private Attachment 1).

### **Environmental land acquisition supports the Strategic Plan and Regional Official Plan**

Environmental lands protected through the Greening Strategy support the Regional Official Plan 2010 objectives to protect and enhance the Greenlands System and increase woodland cover. This property acquisition will contribute to advancing the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan priorities including (i) supporting community health, safety and well-being, and (ii) building sustainable communities and protect the environment. Sustainable management of this property will help meet the specific Strategic Plan objectives of enhancing and preserving green space and advance the key action of increasing tree planting.

Management planning for the property including site securement, removal of derelict buildings, reforestation and trails is underway, and tree planting is expected to commence in the spring of 2022. Given the size of the property it will take several years to complete tree planting and infrastructure improvements required for safe public use. Reforestation activities associated with this addition to the Regional Forest will be partially funded (40%) through DMAF.

Acquisition of this property will provide many environmental and public benefits to Region residents. Environmental land acquisition is integral to advancing the goals of the Greening Strategy, Corporate Strategic Plan, and Regional Official Plan.



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Erin Mahoney, M. Eng.  
Commissioner of Environmental Services



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Bruce Macgregor  
Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments (2)  
Private Attachments (1)  
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