

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Environmental Services
April 4, 2019

Report of the Commissioner of Environmental Services

It's in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 - 2038

1. Recommendations

1. Council approve “It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038”.
2. Council approve the fees for permitted activities in the York Regional Forest, as set out in Attachment 3 and authorize Schedule A of the fees and charges bylaw (Bylaw 2010-15) to be amended to implement these fees.
3. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of the local municipalities and local Conservation Authorities for information.

2. Summary

This report seeks Council approval of It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038, and the associated fees for permitted activities. A summary of the management plan is presented in Attachment 1 and the full management plan can be viewed at York.ca.

Key Points:

- Management of the York Regional Forest has demonstrated leadership in forest management, environmental restoration and public use for over 90 years
- It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038 sets forth the following vision for the Forest:

“As the heart of the Region’s natural landscape, a healthy and ecologically diverse York Regional Forest sustains its communities and inspires its people”
- An approved management plan supports objectives in the Regional Official Plan and is a requirement to maintain Forest Stewardship Council certification

3. Background

2018 marked the end of the existing 20 year management plan for the York Regional Forest. In anticipation of the plan ending, staff undertook a comprehensive process, including stakeholder engagement, to develop a renewed management plan for the York Regional Forest.

For over 90 years our work on the York Regional Forest has demonstrated excellence in sustainable forest management and restoration

Following arrival of Europeans in the 1600's, significant areas of York Region were cleared for settlement, lumbering and agriculture. By the late 1800's the impacts of deforestation were evident, especially on the Oak Ridges Moraine. Rivers and streams alternated between drying and flooding, water tables became unstable, and extensive areas of blow sands covered roads and crops. No longer able to support agriculture these lands were abandoned. These impacts prompted the province to take action, and through the *Reforestation Act, 1921* (the Act), tens of millions of trees were planted across southern Ontario to stabilize soils and restore forest cover.

Under the Act's Agreement Forest Program, the Province partnered with municipalities to establish 56 agreement forests across southern Ontario. Through this program the Province provided and planted trees and managed forests on degraded lands held by municipalities. The York County Agreement Forest, now the York Regional Forest, was established in 1924 with the planting of trees in the Hollidge Tract, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville. By 1994 the York Regional Forest had grown to 18 tracts of land spanning 2,031 hectares.

Following a review of the Agreement Forest Program in 1994, the Province concluded that management of the agreement forests should be transferred to forest owners. As a condition of transfer, the Region prepared the 1998 - 2018 forest management plan. In 2000 management of the York Regional Forest was officially transferred to the Region.

Since 1998 York Region has managed the Forest continuing the legacy of leadership in sustainable forest management

At its meeting on December 10, 1998 Council adopted the York Regional Forest Management Plan 1998 – 2018. The plan placed a strong emphasis on the ecological sustainability of the York Regional Forest while recognizing the many social and economic values it provides. During the past twenty years there have been many significant achievements associated with the York Regional Forest, including becoming the first public forest in Canada to achieve Forest Stewardship Council certification.

Today the York Regional Forest is comprised of 23 tracts of land totalling 2,400 hectares with over 148 kilometres of trails, including 4.3 kilometres of accessible trails. The York Regional Forest is an integral part of the Regional Greenlands system and a network of publicly available greenspace that includes National and Provincial parks and local municipal open space areas. Today the York Regional Forest is a destination for residents to participate in nature oriented recreational activities including walking/dog walking, nature appreciation,

cycling, horseback riding, and skiing/snowshoeing and hosts over 600,000 visits annually throughout all seasons.

4. Analysis

A comprehensive engagement plan was implemented to solicit input from residents, key stakeholders and forest users

In anticipation of the ending of the 1998 – 2018 forest management plan, a comprehensive forest management planning process was implemented. Figure 1 summarizes the process followed to develop the plan including engagement with residents, Indigenous peoples, stakeholders and forest users. Development of the plan was completed over two years to provide multiple opportunities for public input.

The public was engaged throughout the process through user surveys, workshops and information sessions. In addition, a technical working group provided detailed input into the management plan. Stakeholders, including the York Regional Forest Advisory Team, represented a wide cross-section of forest interests (Attachment 2).

Figure 1
Forest management planning and engagement process



Public feedback was instrumental in guiding development of the renewed forest management plan

During the engagement process residents identified that existing management direction was working well and should continue. Residents also identified key drivers and risks that should be considered in the renewed management plan including; the need to balance environmental protection and increasing public use, the importance of environmental education and connecting people with the forest, and managing impacts associated with climate change (e.g. extreme weather and invasive species). York Regional Forest users felt the existing rules related to public use were appropriate but suggested the need for more education to help provide clarity around expectations and perhaps more signage.

Input received throughout the process was incorporated into development of the plan including its vision, goals and actions. Feedback received during the final review of the draft management plan supported the plan's vision and future direction for the York Regional Forest.

Management of the York Regional Forest will continue to support protection of ecological features and functions while providing a multitude of benefits to residents

Building on the direction set in the previous management plan and with input from stakeholders, the following updated vision was developed for the York Regional Forest:

- As the heart of the Region's natural landscape, a healthy and ecologically diverse York Regional Forest sustains its communities and inspires its people

Achieving this vision will be guided by three broad goals, each representing elements of the vision. These goals will guide management decisions and activities over the next 20 years and include:

1. Strengthen Ecological Integrity - Continue to strengthen the health, diversity, resiliency and sustainability of the York Regional Forest
2. Foster an Understanding of the Broader Benefits - Demonstrate that the Forest provides a wealth of environmental and social benefits, making it key to the Region's vision of healthy, thriving communities
3. Inspire People - Encourage public use that inspires respect for the Forest and a connection with nature

Specific objectives and actions have been developed for each goal (see Attachment 1) and are key to setting work priorities. A comprehensive monitoring program will provide a framework for assessing progress towards the vision.

Providing an exceptional visitor experience through compatible public use and educational programming will remain a cornerstone of the York Regional Forest

The previous forest management plan identified acceptable and prohibited activities in the York Regional Forest, which are collectively referred to as the “rules of the forest”. Users felt existing rules were reasonable, but more public education was required. The renewed plan continues to identify these acceptable and prohibited uses, and has added two new activities including allowing scientific research, and prohibiting paint ball guns and fireworks (see Attachment 1).

Two new uses, geocaching and operations of unmanned aerial vehicles (drones) have been addressed in the plan. Geocaching has been added to the list of acceptable uses with the restriction that all caches be located within 2 metres of a trail. Operation of unmanned aerial vehicles has been added to the prohibited list due to noise, safety and privacy concerns, which is consistent with National and Provincial parks.

The Region delivers environmental education programs within the York Regional Forest, including guided walks, forest festivals, and group specific programs. Programming is focused on introducing users to the forest, and educating residents on the rich history, management and appropriate use, which in turn helps foster a sense of environmental stewardship.

Off-leash dog walking was identified as a growing use requiring further engagement and study

Dog walking is one of the most popular activities in the York Regional Forest. The most recent forest use survey indicated 52 per cent of respondents walked dogs in the forest. During development of the plan, users expressed support for dog walking, but there were varied opinions on whether dogs needed to be leashed. The current rule states that the York Regional Forest is not an off leash dog park, and that dogs must be under control at all times and leashed around other forest users. Some users, including dog walkers, identified negative experiences with off leash dogs, while others identified walking their dog off leash as the main reason to visit the York Regional Forest. Other users indicating they stopped using specific tracts or the entire forest due to off leash dogs. In 2014 a specific fenced off leash dog area was constructed at the Bendor and Graves Tract, Town of East Gwillimbury. While extensively used, the off leash area does not provide the walking in nature opportunity many dog walkers desire.

During development of the plan it was clear that dog walking is very important to many York Regional Forest users and finding a solution would require more dialogue and study. As one of the ten actions proposed in the renewed forest management plan, the Region will be undertaking a comprehensive review of dog walking opportunities, including local municipal by-laws, with the goal of providing clear direction and address feedback from forest users.

Organized events and commercial activities will continue to be managed through forest use permits

Each year the Region receives a number of requests (five to ten) from external organizations to host charitable events or undertake commercial activities (e.g. film production) in the York Regional Forest. These activities have the potential to impact other forest users, negatively affect forest ecology and can increase the Region's risk exposure. To manage impacts, event organizers are required to obtain a forest use permit. Permits allow staff to review proposed events and activities to ensure compatibility, modify events and activities to address concerns, and obtain appropriate insurance.

The renewed management plan continues to use forest use permits to manage organized events and commercial activities, including fees and charges to offset costs incurred by the Region (Attachment 3). The proposed fees and charges are in alignment with similar permits issued by the Region and reflect rates charged by other organizations for commercial activities.

The vision and goals for the York Regional Forest will be achieved through a series of actions and continuing existing best practices

The renewed management plan will be delivered through successive five year forest operating plans detailing the type and location of management activities, such as harvesting, tree planting and infrastructure improvements. Existing best practices will continue to be used to manage the York Regional Forest. Forest certification by the Forest Stewardship Council ensures our management meets or exceeds global sustainability standards demonstrating transparency to a more engaged public. The plan identifies ten specific actions to be implemented over the first ten years of the plan (Attachment 1). These actions address public feedback and new challenges pertaining to climate change, invasive species, increasing forest use, education and monitoring.

Monitoring will be an integral component of implementing the plan and help track progress towards achieving the vision and goals.

Management of the York Regional Forest supports the sustainable natural environmental goal of the Regional Official Plan

It's in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038 supports the York Regional Official Plan 2010 triple bottom line objectives and policies. The plan supports the Regional Official Plan 2010 objective to protect and enhance the Regional Greenlands System and its Natural Features components and specifically policy 2.2.51, that York Regional Forests shall be sustainably managed in a manner that enhances their ecological, educational and recreational functions to ensure their health in perpetuity.

Implementation of the plan aligns with 2019 – 2023 Strategic Plan strategic priority areas; support community health, safety and well-being, and build sustainable communities and

protect the environment, including the objective of enhancing and preserving green space. The Plan also supports five of the eight goal areas and multiple actions in Vision 2051.

5. Financial

The renewed management plan will build on existing programs and partnerships and will be funded through existing Natural Heritage and Forestry operating and capital budgets. The approved 2019 Natural Heritage and Forestry division budget includes \$1 million operating and \$0.4 million capital for management of the York Regional Forest. The 10 year capital plan for Natural Heritage and Forestry includes \$4.8 million for the York Regional Forest. As actions are implemented any additional funding requirements will be brought forward for Council's consideration as part of future budget processes. External funding sources including provincial and federal funding programs and partnership opportunities will be explored to support implementation.

6. Local Impact

The York Regional Forest is a key component of the public open space system and complements services provided by Federal and Provincial parks, local municipal green spaces, and lands owned by Conservation Authorities. Implementation of the renewed management plan supports local municipal initiatives to provide residents with outdoor nature oriented recreational activities. Local municipal staff were engaged through the key stakeholder workshops and provided input throughout development of the plan.

7. Conclusion

It's in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038 sets a vision and goals for the management of the York Regional Forest. The plan ensures the forest's long term sustainability and balances the need to protect ecological features and functions while providing benefits to the residents of the Region. Key actions are proposed to address challenges associated with climate change, invasive species and increasing use. Monitoring and reporting will ensure progress is assessed, and practices are continually improved. This management plan ensures the legacy of the York Regional Forest will continue.

For more information on this report, please contact Laura McDowell, Director, Environmental Promotion and Protection at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 75077 or Ian Buchanan, Manager, Natural Heritage and Forestry at ext. 75204. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.

Recommended by: **Erin Mahoney, M. Eng.**
Commissioner of Environmental Services

Approved for Submission: **Bruce Macgregor**
Chief Administrative Officer

March 22, 2019
Attachments (3)
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