

The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole
Planning and Economic Development
June 13, 2019

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Chief Planner

Planning for Agriculture Background Report

1. Recommendations

1. Council direct staff to proceed with consultation on the proposed agricultural system as outlined in this report as part of the Regional Municipal Comprehensive Review.
2. The Regional Clerk forward this report and attachments to the Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and Clerks of the local municipalities.

2. Summary

A Province-wide agricultural system has been introduced as part of the updates to key provincial plans to be implemented by the Region through updated policies and mapping. This report and attachments includes background analysis and a proposed approach for implementation of the agricultural system as part of the Regional Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) to update the Regional Official Plan. Final agricultural mapping and policy directions and updates will be included in the draft Regional Official Plan anticipated in spring 2020.

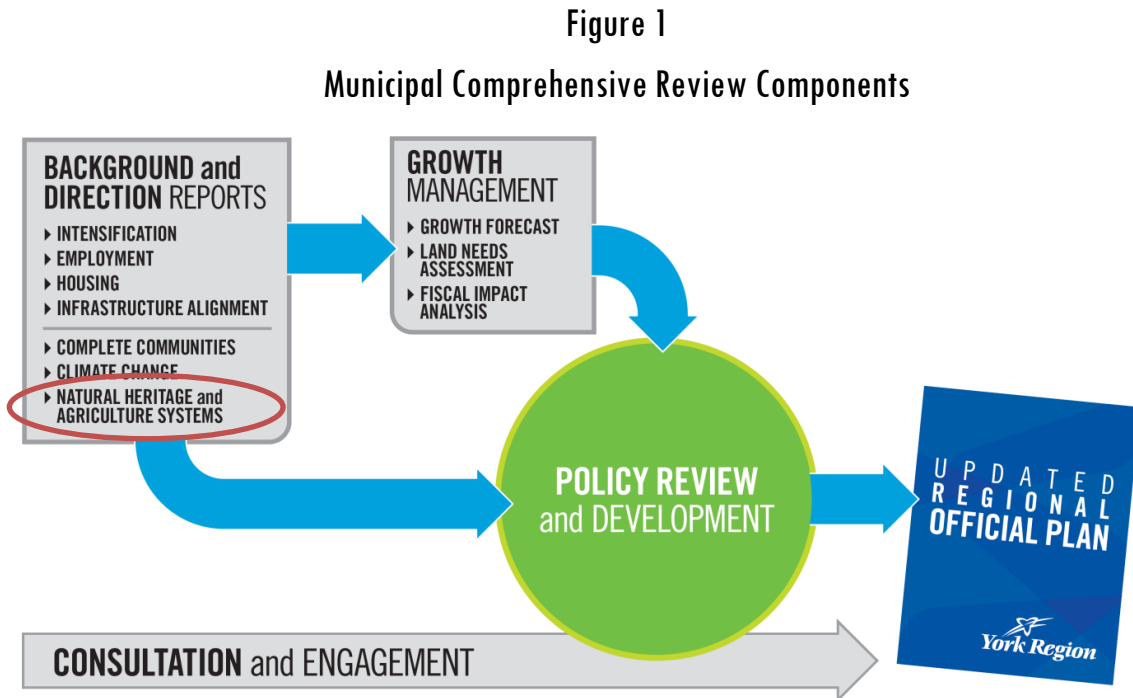
Key Points:

- Minor modifications to the agricultural land use designation in the Regional Official Plan are proposed including some areas of expansion into the rural area
- An approach to update the Official Plan is proposed to ensure conformity to provincial plans and the Provincial Policy Statement
- The Planning Advisory Committee was presented staff's proposed policy and mapping approach and is generally supportive of the direction
- Staff will continue to consult on the proposed mapping and policy changes consideration of for cemetery uses in the agricultural designation with impacted land owners, local municipalities, Agriculture and Agri-Food Advisory Committee (Agricultural Committee), MCR working groups, provincial staff and the public

3. Background

The Municipal Comprehensive Review includes implementation of the agricultural system

This report is one of a series of reports to support planning for sustainable growth through the MCR and Regional Official Plan update. Through the MCR, York Region will be updating agricultural policies and mapping in the Official Plan. Various reports and studies informing the MCR are shown in Figure 1.



York Region provided input to the provincial plan review on the agricultural system

York Region has been continually engaged in the provincial plan review process and provided recommendations to the Province on the introduction of an agricultural system in [September 2017](#). Council supported the collaborative and flexible provincial approach to finalize identification of the agricultural system through approval of the York Region Official Plan.

The Province introduced an agricultural systems approach to support the protection of farmland, and promoting economic development of the agri-food sector. The systems approach extends beyond protecting the agricultural land base and includes identifying support elements of the agri-food network. The York Region Official Plan will designate the agricultural system and including speciality crop areas (Holland Marsh in York Region), agricultural areas (prime agriculture) and rural lands where active agriculture and related uses are ongoing and link agricultural areas and support elements of the agri-food network.

The agri-food network consists of a broad range of elements including farm buildings, agricultural services, farm markets, primary processing, distributors as well as the infrastructure that connects them.

4. Analysis

York Region is well positioned to implement the provincial agricultural system

The existing policy framework in the Regional Official Plan recognizes and supports the agricultural land base and its contribution to the agri-food network as a strong component to the Region's economy. In 2009, the Regional agricultural land base was established with a provincially approved LEAR (land evaluation and area review) which informed the agriculture and rural land use designations in the Official Plan. This work also provided the basis for strong policy direction in the 2010 Official Plan for the protection of agricultural lands. The new provincial agricultural system approach provides strong policy support to protect and enhance the agricultural community.

York Region's [Agriculture and Agri-Food Strategy](#), endorsed by Council in October 2017 reinforces the Region's commitment to this vital sector. Implementation of the agricultural system through the Official Plan will help to achieve the Strategy's goals to support the agri-food sector with integrated land use planning and economic development.

Required policy conformity exercise builds on the existing Official Plan framework

Staff undertook a detailed review of the Provincial Policy Statement and three updated provincial plans related to the agricultural system and found that many of the Official Plan policies already reflect provincial policy direction. Staff proposes that the policy conformity approach build on the existing Official Plan policy framework. Consultation will continue with local municipalities, Agricultural Committee, Municipal Comprehensive Review working groups, provincial staff and the public to help inform updated draft Official Plan policies for Council consideration and input. Attachment 1 provides a summary of the policy conformity updates. Some of the more substantive updates that are anticipated include:

- Additional agricultural uses permitted in agricultural and rural area designations stemming from new definitions to support the agricultural system including agriculture-related uses, agri-tourism uses, on-farm diversified uses, prime agricultural area and rural area
- Requirement for an Agricultural Impact Assessment for new non-agriculture uses that may impact existing agricultural operations or agri-food network facilities to ensure that compatibility is achieved and where not, impacts are minimized and/or mitigated
- Inclusion of additional criteria for settlement boundary expansions into agricultural areas

- Stronger policy language to enhance the viability of the agri-food network such as support for healthy, local and affordable food options including urban agriculture
- New agricultural uses may occur in the buffer areas of key natural heritage and key hydrologic features subject to criteria and in some cases without the requirement of an environmental study

Differing Provincial and York Region LEAR approaches result in additional agriculture lands being identified by the Province for potential designation

The Province has produced draft mapping for municipalities to use as the basis for identifying the agricultural system in official plans. No mapping changes are proposed to specialty crop areas. To develop the draft mapping, the Province undertook a LEAR using a different methodology than that used to inform the Regional Official Plan. The York Region LEAR used one additional criterion of ‘conflicting land uses’ and the unit size York Region used was 100 acre (40 ha) blocks; the Province used 25 acre (10 ha) blocks. These differences, in addition to the Province’s limited capacity to consider exceptions and unique local circumstances, resulted in the identification of additional agricultural lands for consideration when updating [Map 8 of the Regional Official Plan](#).

41 study areas have been evaluated to potentially extend the agricultural designation

To assist staff in updating the agricultural land based mapping, a consultant was retained to compare and assess differences between the proposed provincial mapping and the Region’s current agricultural mapping. Forty-one refinement study areas identify where provincial agricultural areas overlap with York Region’s rural areas as outlined in the [Region of York Agricultural Land Base Refinements report](#) and [appendix one](#). The technical analysis was based upon criteria described in Table 2 of the consultant’s report and the Province’s [Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario’s Golden Horseshoe](#).

The exercise resulted in portions of 19 of the refinement study areas that could be considered by Council for inclusion into the agricultural area designation, being located in East Gwillimbury, Georgina, King, Richmond Hill, Vaughan and Whitchurch-Stouffville. The detailed mapping for each of the areas proposed to be changed is found in Attachment 2. Although the Province identified larger areas than what the consultant is recommending, based upon the evaluation process carried out staff is supportive of proceeding to land owner and stakeholder engagement on the proposed mapping and policy directions.

Land owners will be consulted on the areas identified to be considered for re-designation from Rural to Agriculture

In partnership with local municipal staff, York Region will consult with potentially impacted land owners informing them of a proposed change in the land use designation of their properties. Agricultural Committee members and provincial staff will be encouraged to

attend. This feedback this will help inform updated mapping of the agricultural system in the Official Plan.

Agricultural and Natural Heritage systems complement each other providing environmental benefits and protection

The Greenbelt Plan holds both the Natural Heritage System (NHS) and agricultural system in high regard with complementary policy protection. The NHS is an overlay on top of the agricultural system; the two systems support one another and maintain connections to the broader systems. Both contain natural resources and support recreational and tourism uses and support a vibrant agricultural economy. Together the stewardship of these systems facilitates environmental benefits and agricultural protection.

The agricultural designation of river valleys located in predominantly urban areas is being assessed

There are a number of river valleys reaching south in the Protected Countryside of the Greenbelt Plan that resemble 'green fingers' extending into the Markham and Vaughan urban areas. These river valleys are protected by both the NHS and agricultural systems. They provide an environmental buffer to the watercourses and Official Plan policies protect these lands from any substantial urban development.

Given that these areas are surrounded by or planned for urban development, staff is working with the consultant to assess the appropriateness of the agricultural designation. Through consultation with local municipal, conservation authority and provincial staff in addition to the public, staff may make recommendations for a different policy and land use designation approach for these areas while maintaining protection of the features. Land use designations that may be considered for the river valleys that run through new urban areas include rural or related natural heritage system/protected countryside designation.

Staff are seeking input on principles for considering cemeteries on agricultural lands

The 2016 [York Region Cemetery Needs Analysis and Policy Framework](#) (Cemetery Needs Analysis) was undertaken to provide an understanding of York Region's cemetery industry, existing cemetery land supply and future demand for cemetery uses. The Cemetery Needs Analysis also meets the provincial requirement to demonstrate need during the planning horizon in the event that agricultural lands are required to meet the Region's cemetery needs.

Currently, the Regional Official Plan is silent on where cemeteries are permitted. The Cemetery Needs Analysis provided recommendations to consider permitting new or expanded cemeteries in the agricultural designation subject to criteria. It is intended that rural designated lands will be explored and evaluated first before considering cemeteries on

agricultural lands. Consultation will be initiated to assess a potential policy framework on the following principles:

- Anticipated need for interments consistent with the findings of the Cemetery Needs Analysis
- Acknowledge the long term presence of cemeteries
- Respect interment and memorialization traditions of all residents
- Acknowledge the diversity of cemetery services and service providers
- Promote innovative options to deliver cemetery uses
- Recognize the value of cemeteries as part of a complete, sustainable community
- Optimize the environmental and social value of cemeteries
- Locating cemeteries within reasonable distance to population centres
- Locate and design cemeteries to meet multiple land use planning and environmental objectives (e.g. groundwater protection, natural heritage linkages, and passive recreation)

Staff are reviewing policies for existing rural commercial uses on agricultural lands currently with limited opportunity to expand or change use

Council as part of the provincial plan review recommended that a method be developed to recognize and permit existing non-agricultural uses within the agricultural designation to allow for limited redevelopment of land subject to criteria. Considerations for removing lands from the agricultural to the rural designation will not be contemplated as part of this potential policy approach. Many of these existing non-agricultural uses such as outdoor storage facilities, automotive repair shops and antique shops have limited or no opportunity to be redeveloped, potentially to a more compatible use, under the Greenbelt Plan policy framework. Consultation with local municipal planning staff is being initiated. Any proposed policy will need to take into consideration maintaining the integrity of this agricultural system. Staff will report back to Council as part of the draft Official Plan.

5. Financial

Background work for the implementation of the agricultural system has been undertaken within the existing staff complement and budget of the Planning and Economic Development Branch which included retaining an agricultural consultant to carry out the agricultural land assessment.

The agri-food sector in York Region includes everything from farms to processors, food

retailers and restaurants, and provides approximately 57,000 jobs and generates \$2.7 billion in GDP (gross domestic product) for York Region. Agriculture in York Region is a strong contributor to the economy and it is important to support this growing and vibrant industry.

6. Local Impact

Regional staff has met regularly with local municipal planning and economic development staff to discuss the implementation of the agricultural system. The Local Municipal MCR Working Group as well as individual meetings with the consultant on the proposed mapping has included local municipal staff as an integral part of the dialogue. In March 2019, the Planning Advisory Committee was provided the proposed policy and mapping approach and is generally supportive of staff's direction. Several local municipal staff members also attend the Agricultural Committee meetings where the implementation of the agricultural system has been discussed over the past year. Continued consultation with local municipal staff and the Planning Advisory Committee will occur as the policy and mapping work is completed through the MCR process. Local municipalities are key partners in the support to protect and enhance the agricultural system.

7. Conclusion

The provincial plans require the Region to implement the agricultural system through updated policy and mapping. Continued engagement will occur with the next steps of meeting directly with potentially impacted land owners to discuss proposed mapping changes as well as the cemetery industry to consider cemetery uses in the agricultural designation. The agriculture and the agri-food sector have a strong presence in York Region and the implementation of the provincial agricultural system will help to further support its prosperity. Staff will undertake the next phase in the implementation of the agricultural system and the mapping and policy updates will be presented in the draft Official Plan in spring 2020.

For more information on this report, please contact Danielle De Fields, Manager, Policy and Environment at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 71525. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.

Recommended by: **Paul Freeman, MCIP, RPP**
Chief Planner

Dino Basso
Commissioner of Corporate Services

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

May 30, 2019
Attachments (2)
eDOCS #9238334