



REPORT

REPORT TO: Mayor Bonnette and Members of Council

REPORT FROM: Keith Hamilton – Planner, Policy

DATE: September 18, 2020

REPORT NO.: PD-2020-0038

RE: Regional Official Plan Review – Natural Heritage Discussion Paper

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Report No. PD-2020-0038, dated September 18, 2020, regarding the Regional Official Plan Review – Natural Heritage Discussion Paper, be received;

AND FURTHER THAT Council's consideration of this report be deferred to the October 13th Council meeting;

AND FURTHER THAT Council endorse the discussion question responses submitted by Town staff, attached as Schedule Two to this report, to be submitted to the Region of Halton in advance of the commenting deadline of October 30, 2020;

AND FURTHER THAT a copy of this report be forwarded to the Region of Halton as input into the Natural Heritage System component of the Regional Official Plan Review Process;

AND FURTHER THAT a copy of this report be forwarded to the Local Municipalities of Burlington, Milton and Oakville, Conservation Halton, Credit Valley Conservation and the Grand River Conservation Authority.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of this report is to:

- Provide an overview of Halton Region's Natural Heritage Discussion Paper (attached as Schedule One);
- Provide a summary of Town staff's participation in the consultation process for developing the Discussion Paper; and,
- Provide staff's responses to the 13 discussion questions presented in the Discussion Paper, to be submitted to Halton Region by October 30, 2020.

BACKGROUND:

1.0 Halton Region Official Plan Review

The Region of Halton is currently undertaking a Regional Official Plan Review (ROPR), as required under the Planning Act (Section 26). This Review will produce a revised Regional Official Plan (ROP) that is consistent with multiple Provincial Plans, including the Growth Plan and Provincial Policy Statement. This is a three phase process that began with a [Directions Report](#) outlining the goals and deliverables of the ROPR. The Review is currently in Phase 2, which has resulted in the release of five 'Discussion Papers' designed to inform and solicit feedback from Halton's Area Municipalities, Conservation Authorities, special interest groups, and the general public. The five papers are on key policy areas (components) that shape the ROP, including:

- Climate Change;
- Integrated Growth Management (Urban Structure);
- Regional Natural Heritage System;
- Rural Agricultural System; and,
- The North Aldershot Planning Area

Additionally, Landing Pages were developed for each of the Discussion Papers to provide a simplified summary of the Discussion Papers intended to facilitate consultation with the public. The Discussion Papers and Landing Pages were presented as part of a workshop to Regional Council on July 8, 2020 and released for public consultation on July 15, 2020. Region staff provided a presentation to Town Council on September 14th, which summarized each Discussion Paper, and provided Council an opportunity to ask questions and provide comments.

1.1 Role of the Natural Heritage System in the Regional Official Plan Review

The Regional Natural Heritage System (RNHS), as a component of the ROP, provides a basis for Regional environmental policies that ensure protection for the natural environment as Halton continues to grow. The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper plays a critical role in the ROPR process by serving as a guide to the current system, and outlining necessary and potential changes to RNHS policies and mapping. The paper also serves a tool for public consultation, providing 13 discussion questions for which the public can submit responses to Region staff.

It has also been acknowledged in Phase 2 of the ROPR that policy areas (from which the Discussion Papers are based) have an impact on one another. The RNHS impacts the other components of the ROP by:

- Helping to shape the urban structure of Halton Region by identifying key natural heritage features and natural system linkage areas to be protected from development and the impacts of human activities;

- Maintaining a strong presence in the rural and agricultural areas while coexisting with agricultural land needs; and,
- Playing a critical role in mitigating the impacts of climate change by serving as a natural barrier to hazards such as flooding, and helping to reduce the impacts of greenhouse gas emissions.

2.0 Extended Consultation on Refinements to Natural Heritage System Mapping

In addition to the development of the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper, Town staff was involved in additional consultation on proposed refinements to RNHS mapping. Town staff had expressed concerns over proposed system mapping changes, which included:

- The proposed addition of an extensive area of Growth Plan Natural Heritage System lands southwest of Georgetown (known as the Y-lands) to the RNHS;
- New and expanded RNHS Key Feature mapping in Halton Hills settlement areas;
- RNHS mapping of lands not designated as Greenlands in the Halton Hills Official Plan; and,
- New and expanded RNHS Key Feature mapping into lands that have been cleared and developed for other uses (e.g. residential, industrial).

Consultation with Region staff on the above-noted items is ongoing. At the time of writing this report, many initial concerns have been addressed and resolved. Town and Region staff has committed to continue with the open dialogue moving forward, in an effort to address any Halton Hills' specific mapping concerns that remain outstanding.

3.0 Natural Heritage System Discussion Paper

The Region's Natural Heritage Discussion Paper provides an overview of the RNHS in its current state and outlines required mapping and policy changes, as well as discussion on other potential policy modifications. The following is a brief summary of the paper's components:

- **The evolving Regional Natural Heritage System:** The RNHS has evolved from 'natural area planning' established in the 1980s to the current system adopted under the 2009 ROP, which protects approximately 50 per cent of the Region's land area. The RNHS is rooted in two concepts; 'sustainable development' and 'landscape permanence' which acknowledge the role of the RNHS of preserving natural ecosystems for future generations. Also acknowledged here is the presence of the Greenbelt Natural Heritage System (GBNHS) in Halton. This system was brought into the RNHS in 2009 as a separate set of policies within the Greenbelt Plan Area. Although separate, the RNHS and GBNHS largely consist of the same goals and objectives.

- **The Growth Plan Natural Heritage System:** Natural Heritage policies under the Growth Plan have changed considerably since 2009. Most notably in 2017, a Growth Plan Natural Heritage System (NHSGP) was created which must be incorporated into municipal Official Plans. This section of the Discussion Paper focuses on how NHSGP mapping and policies should be adopted into the ROP.
- **Policy and mapping changes:** Considerable discussion is given in the paper to the expansion or revision of current ROP policies based on changes to Provincial policies, discrepancies in current RNHS mapping, and additional actions required to achieve RNHS objectives. This includes discussion around the use of buffers and how they are defined in the ROP, and the precautionary principle as the basis for policies that protect the natural environment.
- **Designation mapping options:** Consideration for how the RNHS should be mapped in order to balance the needs of agriculture and natural heritage protection resulted in four mapping options presented in section 5 of the paper. These options are based on recent updates to the Growth Plan and PPS, which call for the designation of Prime Agricultural Areas:
 - **Option 1:** RNHS mapped entirely as an overlay with a designated Prime Agricultural Area.
 - **Option 2:** Designated RNHS Key Features and Prime Agricultural Area, with all other RNHS components (i.e. linkage areas) as an overlay.
 - **Option 3:** Separate designations for RNHS Key Features in and outside of the designated Prime Agricultural Area, with all other RNHS components (i.e. linkage areas) as an overlay.
 - **Option 4:** All RNHS components (with Key Features) as one designation, and one Agricultural Area designation (with Prime Agricultural Area overlay).
- **Water Resource System:** The need for a clearly identified Water Resource System (WRS), based on recent updates to Provincial policies, is identified in section 6 of the paper. The basis for this will be policies that identify and protect Key Hydrologic Features (e.g. aquifers, rivers, streams). Discussion also identifies the need to connect the WRS to the existing RNHS, given they share many of the same Key Features (e.g. wetlands).
- **Other considerations:** Also included is a section outlining other areas of interest that were identified in the research leading up to the creation of the Natural Heritage Discussion Paper. These include:
 - The proposed creation of a Regional Natural Heritage Strategy to be supported by policies in the ROP. This strategy would focus on the promotion of environmental stewardship and other activities that protect natural areas and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

- Enhancing ROP policies to address climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.
- Consideration for the manner in which Source Protection policies are implemented into the ROP.
- The need to update policies on natural hazards mapping to be consistent with updated Provincial policies.
- The potential need to update the definition of, and policies related to Significant Woodlands to better acknowledge woodland quality and ecological significance.

COMMENTS:

1.0 Summary of Town Staff Comments

As a participant in the ROPR consultation process, Town Policy Planning staff has worked together to draft responses to the thirteen (13) discussion questions included in the Discussion Paper. These responses (along with the questions) have been attached as Schedule Two to this report. Town staff provided responses consistent with comments and concerns expressed throughout the development of the Discussion Papers, which included:

- **Mapping:** Town staff expressed support for a harmonized Provincial Natural Heritage System overlay made up of the existing Greenbelt NHS and Growth Plan NHS which must be brought into the ROP through this review. Additionally, staff supports a system mapping option that would see Natural Heritage Key Features and Prime Agricultural land as separate designations with other components of the RNHS mapped as an overlay. This option would maintain the current RNHS while providing more flexibility for other planning interests in the rural areas of the Region.
- **Implementation of Regional Buffer Framework into the ROP:** Town staff support the current case-by-case analysis approach to applying buffers. Moving forward, policies should apply a science-based approach and consider the sensitivity of the key features being impacted. Lastly, any new or expanded policies on buffers should support a context-specific approach that supports the development of complete communities in Halton.
- **Significant Woodlands policies:** Town staff noted a need for a more comprehensive approach to identifying and defining Significant Woodlands. Currently the criteria for defining a Significant Woodland focuses largely on the size of the wooded area. The Region should also consider studies completed locally as part of Secondary Plans and other projects when identifying these woodlands.
- **Additional Considerations:** Town staff expressed consideration for a Regional Natural Heritage System that is sustainable, based on ground-truthing and

completed environmental studies and research. Policy discussion should also consider opportunities to restore natural areas as a means of expanding the RNHS. Lastly, RNHS policies should demonstrate some flexibility in being applied as part of a context-specific approach, avoiding a one size fits all framework.

2.0 Next Steps in the ROPR Process

Upon release of the Discussion Papers and Landing Pages, the Region will record and respond to input received through public engagement, and present it to Regional Council in a Consultation Summary Report. The input related to the Natural Heritage System Discussion Paper will also be used to identify opportunities to further modify policies to protect and enhance the RNHS.

The comments the Region receives on the Discussion Papers and Landing Pages will be used in determining 'policy directions' that will be presented to Council in advance of preparing amendments to the Regional Official Plan. It is anticipated that the Region will provide additional opportunities for public engagement, such as Public Information Centres (PICs) and stakeholder meetings, in the forthcoming Phase 3 of the Regional Official Plan Review in 2021. Phase 3 will involve presenting draft ROP policy directions for public and stakeholder group comment, and finalizing any necessary Regional Official Plan Amendment(s). Further public consultation on policy directions for each ROP component will take place in 2021. Town staff will continue to keep members of Council informed on any developments and engagement opportunities associated with the ROPR, including:

- Regional Council workshops on ROPR components (including the Integrated Growth Management Strategy);
- Any public outreach including Town Halls, Public Information Centres, or any online consultation;
- Any planned presentations to local Councils by Regional staff on the progress of the ROPR;
- Any reports to Regional Council on the progress of the ROPR;
- Any future opportunities for Town staff to engage in and provide comment on the ROPR; and,
- Future Town staff reports on the progress for the ROPR.

The Region is also proposing to introduce a separate ROPA to address local municipal planning priorities related to urban structure and to facilitate a special meeting of Council by year end 2020. The proposed ROPA will include the following planning matters: Urban Growth Centres, Major Transit Station Areas (including boundaries and density targets), Strategic Growth Corridors (potential identification and density targets) and limited Employment Land Conversions of those properties identified by local municipalities as having strategic importance in advancing elements of the local urban structure.

As Council may recall, Regional Council previously directed that the four growth concepts based on the “Local Plans and Priorities Growth Scenarios” be carried forward for further refinement and analysis. It is our understanding that further work is being undertaken by the Region on the concepts to respond to the revised growth forecasts and extended planning horizon contained in Amendment No. 1 to the Growth Plan. The exact timelines to present the revised growth concepts and ultimately select a preferred growth concept have yet to be finalized.

RELATIONSHIP TO STRATEGIC PLAN:

This report directly aligns to the following values in the Strategic Plan 2019-2022 including:

Foster a Healthy Community

To maintain and enhance a healthy community that provides a clean environment and a range of economic and social opportunities to ensure a superior quality of life in our community.

Preserve, Protect and Enhance our Environment

To preserve, protect and enhance our natural environment for the health benefits and enjoyment it provides to present and future generations.

Preserve, Protect and Enhance our Countryside

To protect and enhance the open space character of our countryside.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There are no financial impacts associated with this report.

CONSULTATION:

Planning staff will continue to consult with the different Town departments including, Transportation and Public Works, Recreation and Parks, Economic Development, Climate Change, Finance and Fire through the ROPR process. Staff will also continue to update the Senior Management Team and Council.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

The Region will conduct consultation primarily through online engagement. An expanded 75 day consultation period from July 15 – September 28, 2020 will include:

- Discussion Papers and Landing Pages, which summarize the Discussion Papers, being posted on halton.ca/ropr
- People will be able to provide their responses to questions posed and/or general comments using an online survey tool;

- Presentations to local municipal Councils on the Discussion Papers, as requested.
- Meetings with Advisory Committees;
- Public Information Centres, which will be held virtually, but following the same outline as a traditional Public Information Centre with an introduction, staff presentation and question/answer session. A technical moderator and a process facilitator will be utilized. People who do not have access to the virtual meeting because they do not have the technology, are not comfortable with the technology, or have accessibility issues will be accommodated;
- Public Information Centre meeting materials and questions, which will be posted on halton.ca/ropr to allow people to provide input and comments after the sessions;
- Stakeholder meetings, which will be held using a virtual meeting format;
- Indigenous people's engagement undertaken on a case-by-case basis depending on the preferences of those communities; and
- Receipt of comments to the Regional Official Plan email account at ropr@halton.ca.

Public notification of future engagement opportunities will be promoted through the Region's website, newspaper advertisements, signboards, mailing lists, social media, stakeholder groups, and other means. Given that part of the engagement period is during the summer, most engagement activities will be focused in the month of September. Recognizing that the engagement plan may have to be adjusted in light of changes to COVID-19 restrictions, Regional staff will continue to monitor restrictions and make adjustments as needed.

Virtual Public Information Centre

Halton Region hosted a combined Virtual Public Information Centre (PIC) regarding the Natural Heritage and Rural Agricultural System Discussion Papers on September 17. The PIC was held from 7:00-9:00 pm which Town staff attended virtually. The format of the PICs included a presentation by Regional staff along with a Question and Answer period where Region staff responded to questions that were emailed or submitted through the chat function from the public. The presentation can be found in the [Regional Official Plan Review webpage](#).

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS:

The Town is committed to implementing our Community Sustainability Strategy, Imagine Halton Hills. Doing so will lead to a higher quality of life.

The recommendation outlined in this report directly relates to the Land Use goals in Imagine Halton Hills under the Environmental Health pillar.

Overall, the alignment of this report with the Community Sustainability Strategy is:
GOOD

COMMUNICATIONS:

Upon Council approval of this report, a copy will be forwarded to the Region of Halton, the Local Municipalities of Burlington, Milton and Oakville, Conservation Halton, Credit Valley Conservation and the Grand River Conservation Authority.

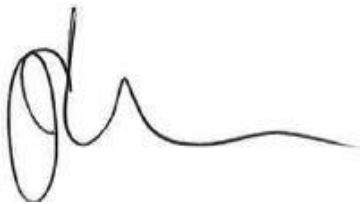
CONCLUSION:

The Natural Heritage Discussion Paper provides a framework that will be utilized when determining policy measures to both protect and enhance the Halton Regional Natural Heritage System. Town staff has participated in the development of this paper and have provided responses (attached as Schedule Two) to the paper's 13 discussion questions. These responses reflect the local context, values and interests of Halton Hills, while acknowledging the importance of preserving natural heritage through responsible planning policies. Town staff looks forward to on-going discussion through the public consultation phase and continuing to participate in the development of updated policies through the Regional Official Plan Review.

Reviewed and Approved by,



Bronwyn Parker, Director of Planning Policy



John Linhardt, Commissioner of Planning and Development



Chris Mills, Acting Chief Administrative Officer