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MEMORANDUM

To: Steve Burke - Town of Caledon
From: Nick McDonald
Date: March 2024
Re: The Natural Environment System Policy Framework in the draft new Town Official Plan

The natural environment system policies in the Caledon Official Plan are required to conform to the Region of Peel Official Plan (ROP), the provincial plans that are in effect, and which apply natural environment policies to about 80 percent of the land area of the Town of Caledon and have to be consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement. The purpose of this memorandum is to provide a planning opinion on whether the policies in the new Official Plan do indeed conform to upper tier and provincial policies.

The new Regional Official Plan

On November 3, 2022, the Province of Ontario approved a new ROP. Included within the new ROP were updates to the Greenlands System policy framework to implement changes made in 2017 to the Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the changes made in 2019 to the Growth Plan. As mentioned above, the environmental policies in these four Provincial Plans apply to about 80 percent of the Town of Caledon.

The Regional Greenlands System

The new ROP carried forward the Greenlands System approach from the previous ROP. In this regard, the Greenlands System consists of Core Areas, Natural Areas and Corridors (NACs) and Potential Natural Areas and Corridors (PNACs). Through the development of the new ROP, the following updates were made to the Greenlands System policy framework:

- a) Objectives were added to identify, protect, restore, and enhance the long-term ecological function and biodiversity of the Greenlands System;
- b) The definition of the Greenlands System was updated to recognize the Natural Heritage System and Urban River Valley designations and overlays of the Growth Plan, Greenbelt Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, and Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and their associated key natural heritage features and key hydrologic features as components of the Greenlands System;
- c) A policy was added to maintain, restore, and improve the diversity and connectivity of natural features and areas within the Greenlands System's components, recognizing linkages between and among features and areas;
- d) The Greenlands System Core, NAC and PNAC features based policies were updated in accordance with provincial policy;
- e) Additional direction was provided to the local municipalities to further interpret and identify the Greenlands System and its components and the linkages among and between components of the Greenlands System and Water Resource System at an early stage in the planning process through watershed and subwatershed plans, natural heritage system studies, or other equivalent studies;
- f) The adjacent lands policy was updated to support implementation of a natural heritage system approach in accordance with provincial policy; and
- g) Policy directions were added for the implementation of a natural heritage system approach through the requirements for environmental impact studies including requirements for the identification of buffers, linkages, and enhancement areas where appropriate.

Regional Official Plan Mapping

With respect to mapping, the new ROP included:

- a) A new Schedule A-1 showing water resource system features and areas (these were not previously identified on a schedule to the ROP);
- b) A new Schedule A-3 showing significant groundwater recharge areas (these were not previously identified on a schedule to the ROP);
- c) A new Schedule C-1 showing Regional Greenlands System Core Areas, NAC's and PNAC's (previously, NAC's and PNAC's were not shown in the ROP);
- d) A new Schedule C-2 showing updated Greenlands System Core Areas;

- e) Updated mapping of provincially significant wetlands, which are an element of the Core Areas of the Greenlands System, to reflect provincial mapping information;
- f) Updated mapping of Escarpment Natural Areas to reflect the updated criteria and mapping of Escarpment Natural Areas in the 2017 Niagara Escarpment Plan;
- g) A new Figure 6 showing the Provincial Natural Heritage Systems;
- h) A new Figure 7 differentiating between Core Areas, NAC's and PNAC's; and
- i) A new Figure 8 identifying the Conservation Authority Natural Heritage System.

Current Caledon Official Plan

The Town's Official Plan establishes an Ecosystem Framework, which is comprised of Natural Core Areas, Natural Corridors, Supportive Natural Systems, and Natural Linkages. The Natural Core Areas and Natural Corridors represent the fundamental components of the ecosystem.

The Natural Core Areas category includes woodland core areas, wetland core areas, Escarpment Natural Areas, Life Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest, Environmentally Significant Areas, significant habitats of threatened and endangered species, and significant wildlife habitat. Natural Corridors include core fishery resource areas and valley and stream corridors. As well, both categories also include Key Natural Heritage Features, Key Hydrologic Features, and Hydrologically Sensitive Features that are protected by the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and the Greenbelt Plan.

Both the Natural Core Areas and Natural Corridors are designated Environmental Policy Area (EPA) by the current Official Plan, where development is generally prohibited. Supportive Natural Systems and Natural Linkages play a supporting role; however these areas are not designated in the existing Official Plan. In addition to the above, the existing Official Plan does not specifically identify an over-arching natural heritage or water resource system.

The basic policy framework and mapping in the current Official Plan was established in the early 1990's through OPA 124 (which came into effect on August 1, 1997) and has remained mostly unchanged since that time, except for updates to implement the first iteration of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan in 2004 (OPA 186) and the Greenbelt Plan (OPA 226).

Approach to Developing a new Official Plan

Given that the Town was preparing a new Official Plan, an opportunity existed to further strengthen the natural environment policy framework in the Official Plan and ensure that it aligns with the Regional policy framework to the extent possible. In addition, given the multitude of Provincial environmental policies that exist, there was also a need to update the terminology used in the new Official Plan to ensure conformity as

well.

New Natural Environment System

In this regard, the new Official Plan establishes a Town-wide Natural Environment System (NES) made up of a natural heritage system and a water resource system. The NES is identified in the new Official Plan as a defining feature of the Town and consists of an inter-connected network of natural features and areas such as wetlands, woodlands, valleylands, lakes and rivers and their flood plains, aquifers and associated buffers, linkages and enhancement areas.

The new Official Plan recognizes that the NES plays an important role in addressing climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions through carbon storage and helping us to adapt to the impacts of climate change (e.g., reducing the urban heat island effect). The new Official Plan also recognizes that the NES significantly contributes to the health and wellbeing of residents. In this regard, the Official Plan recognizes that the NES provides physical and mental benefits to residents and visitors and mitigates impacts to human health from urbanization and climate change. Lastly, the Official Plan recognizes that as Caledon continues to grow and develop, the policies for protecting, conserving, enhancing, and managing the NES will play a critical role in the resilience of Caledon's communities and ecosystems to climate change.

Natural Environment System Objectives

To clearly set out the Town's planning objectives with respect to the NES, the objectives below have been included in the new Official Plan:

- a) maintain, restore, or where possible, enhance the diversity and connectivity of natural features and areas in the Town, and the long-term ecological function and biodiversity of the Natural Environment System recognizing linkages between and among natural features and areas and supporting features and areas;
- b) recognize the important role the Natural Environment System plays in mitigating the impacts of climate change by protecting and enhancing natural features and areas, ecological functions, and connections within the system;
- c) establish a resilient, inter-connected Natural Environment System that preserves and enhances natural features and areas, ecological functions and native biodiversity, contributes to healthy watersheds, recognizes the important role the agricultural and rural landscape plays in the system, and maintains the unique natural landscape and geography of the Town for future generations;
- d) recognize the role and value of compatible and complementary agricultural and rural uses in and adjacent to the Natural Environment System and recognize that flexible approaches to existing uses in

the Natural Environment System are required to recognize historic land use permissions in these areas;

- e) use the watershed as the ecologically meaningful scale for integrated and long-term planning, which can be a foundation for considering cumulative impacts of development;
- f) maintain linkages and related functions among groundwater features, hydrologic functions, natural heritage features and areas, and surface water features;
- g) encourage the acquisition of land within the Natural Environment System by public authorities or non-profit land trusts for conservation purposes;
- h) provide the tools to properly assess the impacts of development applications located within and in proximity to the Natural Environment System;
- i) ensure that development mitigates identified impacts on the Natural Environment System and is appropriately setback and buffered from components of the Natural Environment System; and,
- j) provide opportunities, where appropriate, for passive outdoor recreational activities in the Natural Environment System provided the features and ecological functions are not adversely impacted.

Components of the Natural Environment System

The NES in the draft new Official Plan is made up of the following components:

- a) Core Areas of the Greenlands System as identified and protected in the ROP, and which are designated Natural Features and Areas by the new Official Plan;
- b) Natural Areas and Corridors and Potential Natural Areas and Corridors of the Greenlands System as identified and protected in the ROP, and which are designated Supporting Features and Areas by the new Official Plan;
- c) the Greenbelt Plan Natural Heritage System;
- d) the Greenbelt Plan Urban River Valleys;
- e) the Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan;
- f) the Natural Core Area and Natural Linkage Area designations within the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan;
- g) the Escarpment Natural Area and Escarpment Protection Area designations within the Niagara Escarpment Plan;

- h) Provincially significant Earth Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest
- i) regionally significant Earth Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest;
- j) other key natural heritage features and key hydrologic features identified by Provincial policy; and,
- k) the water resource system, which includes permanent and intermittent streams, wetlands, seepage areas and springs, kettle lakes, highly vulnerable aquifers and significant groundwater recharge areas and Areas of High and Low Aquifer Vulnerability within the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan Area.

Natural Features and Areas

The new Natural Features and Areas (NFA) designation replaces the EPA designation in the current Official Plan and it includes:

- a) Provincially Significant Wetlands;
- b) woodlands meeting one or more of the criteria for Core Area woodland on Table 1 of the ROP;
- c) significant valleylands;
- d) Environmentally Sensitive or Significant Areas;
- e) Provincial Life Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest;
- f) the Escarpment Natural Area designation of the Niagara Escarpment Plan; and,
- g) valley and stream corridors meeting one or more of the criteria for Core Area valley and stream corridors in Table 2 of the ROP.

Supporting Features and Areas

The new Supporting Features and Areas (SFA) overlay designation is a new designation, and it corresponds to the NAC's and PNAC's identified and protected in the ROP and it includes:

- a) evaluated non-provincially significant wetlands;
- b) unevaluated wetlands;
- c) woodlands meeting one or more of the criteria for a Natural Areas and Corridors woodland in Table 1 of the ROP;
- d) cultural woodlands and cultural savannas within the Urban System meeting one or more of the criteria for a Potential Natural Area and Corridor woodland in Table 1 of the ROP;

- e) any other woodland greater than 0.5 hectares that does not meet the criteria for a Natural Areas and Corridors woodland in Table 1 of the ROP;
- f) significant wildlife habitat meeting one or more of the criteria in the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry significant wildlife habitat technical guide, but located outside of an applicable Provincial plan area;
- g) fish habitat;
- h) habitat of aquatic species at risk;
- i) habitat of endangered species and threatened species;
- j) regionally significant Life Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest;
- k) Provincially significant Earth Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest;
- l) regionally significant Earth Science Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest;
- m) the Escarpment Protection Area designation of the Niagara Escarpment Plan;
- n) any other valley and stream corridor that have not been defined as meeting one or more of the criteria for Core Area valley and stream corridors in Table 2 of the ROP;
- o) sensitive head water areas and sensitive groundwater discharge areas;
- p) sensitive groundwater recharge areas;
- q) enhancement areas;
- r) linkages; and,
- s) vegetation protection zones identified in Provincial plans and buffers outside of Provincial plan areas.

Natural System Protection in the current versus the draft new Official Plans

Based on a review of the components in the new NFA and SFA designation, it has been confirmed that all of the components of the current EPA designation in the Town's Official Plan have been accounted for in the new NFA and SFA designations, based on updated mapping prepared by the Region, which has been fully implemented in the Town's Official Plan. The mapping of individual components of the NES has also been updated by the Region through the ROP process and based on a review of existing and proposed mapping, it has been determined that about 21,310 hectares is currently designated EPA in the current Official Plan and that about 27,170 hectares is proposed to be designated NFA and SFA in the draft new Official Plan. This translates into an increase of about 5,860 hectares or 27 percent.

If the lands designated EPA and only NFA are compared, it has been determined that about 21,990 hectares are proposed to be designated NFA, which is an increase of 680 hectares above what is currently designated EPA (21,310 hectares).

With respect to permitted uses in the NFA designation, only a limited number of uses are permitted subject to meeting the “no negative impact” test. Where provincial policy does not permit development in a feature, this prohibition has been incorporated in the draft new Official Plan. All of the feature-specific policies in the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, Niagara Escarpment Plan, Greenbelt Plan and the Growth Plan have been incorporated into the draft new Official Plan as well.

As the SFA designation is an overlay, the uses permitted are those uses that are permitted in the underlying land use designation. However, any Planning Act application in these areas will trigger a screening exercise and possibly an Environmental Impact Study requirement. If Provincial policy prohibits development in a SFA feature, the development prohibition has been included in the new Official Plan. The draft new Official Plan also includes detailed policies on linkages and enhancement areas (which are SFA's), and these will be required to be reviewed through any required screening exercise. These enhancement areas and linkages will augment the spatial extent and resilience of the NES over time and are a key element of the NES.

Preliminary NES in the 2051 New Urban Area

The new Official Plan also proposes to establish a preliminary NES in the new urban area, based on a scoped subwatershed study completed by the Region of Peel in 2022 and a number of detailed policies have been included in the draft new Official Plan on how the scoped subwatershed study is to be implemented through future secondary plan exercises.

Water Resource System

Lastly, the draft new Official Plan also establishes a water resource system, based on direction provided in the ROP. The water resource system includes the following key hydrologic areas, key hydrologic features and other components:

- a) aquifers and unsaturated zones;
- b) areas of high aquifer vulnerability;
- c) groundwater recharge and discharge areas;
- d) highly vulnerable aquifers (which are shown on Schedule D4a);
- e) lakes and kettle lakes;
- f) permanent and intermittent streams;

- g) seepage areas and springs;
- h) significant groundwater recharge areas (which are shown on Schedule D4b);
- i) significant surface water contribution areas;
- j) water tables; and,
- k) wetlands.

The draft new Official Plan does not permit development of site alteration in the water resource system unless certain criteria can be met. In this regard, every Planning Act application will be subject to these policies.

Unmapped Natural Environment System Components

The draft new Official Plan also provides direction on the actions to be taken when features or components of the NES or related ecological and/or hydrologic functions have not been adequately mapped, evaluated, or protected. In this regard if an evaluation finds one or more unmapped natural features and areas, key natural heritage features, or key hydrologic features, the policies of this Plan will be applied to the lands under application as appropriate. This will ensure that those features that are not identified in the mapping are protected for the long term.

Enhancement of the Natural Environment System

The new Official Plan also support enhancements to the NES, where possible, through for example:

- a) increases in the spatial extent of a feature or features;
- b) increases in biological and habitat diversity;
- c) enhancement of ecological system function;
- d) enhancement of wildlife habitat;
- e) enhancement or creation of wetlands, water systems or woodlands;
- f) enhancement of riparian corridors;
- g) enhancement of ecological services;
- h) enhancement of groundwater recharge areas; and,
- i) establishment or enhancement of linkages or connectivity between key natural heritage features,

and/or natural features and areas.

The above enhancements would be reviewed through a Planning Act process and secured as appropriate through conditions of approval or agreements.

Conclusion

It is my conclusion that the NES policies in the draft new Official Plan fully conform to the ROP, the Provincial Plans that apply, and are consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement. It is noted that Regional and Conservation Authority staff have been thoroughly involved and have provided numerous comments on the new policies, with all of these comments considered by the Town. A rigorous internal review process was also undertaken to ensure that the policies in the draft new Official Plan are concise and meet the required policy tests.