

Delegation to the PEDC meeting May 12 2021

**Re. Report PDS 17-2021 - Regional Official Plan Consolidated Policy Report, specifically the Natural Environment System**

*By Liz Benneian*

Good afternoon Chair and Councillors. Thank you for allowing me to speak about the Natural Environment System.

I would like to start by thanking Regional staff for the work they have put into this comprehensive report and also for the extensive public consultation they have conducted. Their thoroughness in this work for establishing Niagara's first Natural Heritage and Water Resource System is much appreciated. It will help the Region plan better for growth, for the protection of our local ecology and for the challenges that climate change will bring.

Staff have provided you with three Natural Environment System Options today. I am here to argue that the best option is the one that is most protective of the environment, Option 3C, with some enhancements, as I call it, 3C+.

By defining where future growth shouldn't go, a NES directs growth to where it should go. What this means for our communities is less flooded basements and less commuting times. It means less greenhouse gas emissions and more green infrastructure. It means less contentious and costly battles over development applications. And it means protecting what's precious for future generations while preserving our important green infrastructure and natural areas for today's citizens.

A strong NES will be necessary to meet the challenges of Climate Change. This April, our Prime Minister announced a 40 to 45 % GHG emission reduction target by 2030, from 2005 levels. He also announced Canada will become a Net Zero emitter by 2050. Canada will not be able to meet these goals without the help of municipalities.

As the Region's own report on Climate Change states: "Municipalities have been identified by the Government of Canada as being key partners in the fight against climate change, as they influence 50% of Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. Land use planning is one of the most effective processes for local adaptation to climate change." So, just to emphasize that again: The most effective tool municipalities have for controlling climate change is good urban planning. As it says in the St. Catharines Climate Change report: "Municipalities are at the front lines of climate change and as a result are also the ideal, and potentially best-positioned governments, to implement policies to protect communities and property from climate related risks."

Protecting the natural areas that provide our cities with the green infrastructure services that mitigate floods, prevent erosion and help cool our communities, not only will help to meet our country's GHG reduction goals, they will also save taxpayers millions of dollars that would otherwise have to be spent to build the grey infrastructure of culverts and other stormwater management systems that don't provide all the benefits of green infrastructure.

The Region's climate change report lists protecting natural heritage and water resources as one of the 6 top ways "to build resilient communities that are able to withstand longer-term weather impacts".

To get the maximum benefits as listed above, you will need to select the best NES Option, 3C+.

The value of the ecosystem services our natural areas provide cannot be dismissed. Again, a study cited in your own Climate Change Discussion paper shows Peel's wetlands, forests and meadows, within just two subwatersheds, mitigate 100-year floods and provide the equivalent of \$704 million worth of engineered stormwater services.

Over the past few weeks, I have read the Region's Climate Change Discussion Paper and The Town Lincoln and the City of St. Catharines Climate Change Adaptation Plans. The data in them is alarming. For instance, the St. Catharines report states there will be an increase in the number of days of over 30 C° from 13 days per year historically, to 50 days by 2050. The hottest days will rise from 33 C to 37 C° in 2050. Precipitation will also significantly increase through all seasons but summer, causing an increasing flooding risk and the overloading of stormwater management systems, with all the additional sewage problems that entails. I could go on, but the bottom line is this: **we have to stop regarding natural systems as something nice to have, and instead recognize this critical green infrastructure for what it is, literally a life-saving and cost-saving form of insurance against the worst financial and human costs of climate change.**

Again, you have the opportunity to choose the best option for the Natural Heritage System, please choose 3C+.

The key difference between the 3B option and the 3C option is that 3C also includes small linkages outside of, and inside of, settlement areas. These linkages, even small ones, are vitally important. If the significant features aren't linked, it's not a system and they won't survive over time. Unfortunately, 3C only includes them in urban areas, if they are in a "natural state". We say even if they are not in a natural state, they should be included because they can be naturalized.

Small linkages can be no more than a sidewalk with a little vegetation on each side and still serve as important linear passages for everything from birds and pollinators to larger creatures who will use them at night when people aren't around.

It's also important that potential linkages of all sizes within urban areas be mapped because cities are dynamic, and they change over time. What might now be a parking lot between a wetland and a woodland in a city might, at some point, when that land is redeveloped, provide the opportunity to establish a link, but if it's not mapped, that opportunity is lost forever. This idea is contained in the idea of 3C+.

The second critical difference between 3B and 3C is that 3C includes supporting features, including enhancement areas, in settlement areas. By including enhancement areas and

supporting features in 3C, you would be helping our urban areas mitigate and adapt to climate change. You would also be providing citizens with a little bit more greenspace where they live.

It was surprising to read in the Glendale project report that Niagara has the second lowest amount of parkland per capita than any Region in the Greater Golden Horseshoe. By selecting 3C, you would at least be ensuring that there is an opportunity to increase greenspaces for people where they live.

The third critical difference between 3B and 3C is that 3C provides mandatory non-specified buffers to natural heritage features inside of settlement areas. That's better than 3B but we would rather have minimum prescribed buffers. As we know, developer-funded studies whittle buffers down to nothing and if there's a significant feature in an urban area, it deserves the protection that a mandatory minimum buffer provides.

**It's important to note that throughout the staff report, staff are clear that there is not much difference in the land required for implementation of 3B and 3C.** For instance, when it comes to adding supporting features and areas including enhancement areas in 3C, the report says: "the amount of land included within these areas is expected to be limited in settlement areas due to the extent of developed area and limited opportunities to incorporate other natural areas into the NES."

In terms of adding small linkages as 3C suggests, the staff report says **linkages would only amount to .1% of a percent of the total land in the urban areas.**

While the land requirements are almost negligible between the two options, the inclusion of linkages, enhancement areas and other features in urban areas could make a significant difference in keeping our remaining natural areas, in our urban communities, viable into the future.

**And finally, given the opportunity to do everything you can to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to provide a healthier environment for your citizens, why wouldn't you choose 3C or our 3C+ over 3B?**

We know that Environment Canada says a minimum requirement for a healthy ecosystem requires the retainment of 30% of land in a natural state. According to the staff report, Niagara has 18.9% of its land in tree cover. We also know from Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority Watershed reports that our forests are fragmented and in poor shape, consistently receiving a "D" rating as does our surface water.

**With development pressure increasing in Niagara, there will be no second chances to save what's left of our natural heritage.**

**This is your opportunity to leave a natural legacy for Niagara's children and grandchildren. I ask you to please choose option 3C+.**

Thank you.

**The key differences between 3C and 3C+ is that 3C+ calls for:**

- \* minimum prescribed buffers for natural heritage features inside of settlement areas (vs mandatory, non-prescribed buffers in 3C)
- \* mapping of all potential linkages of all sizes in urban areas, whether they are in a "natural state" or not to protect the possibility of their future implementation (vs only mapping small linkages in urban areas if they are in a natural state)