
Subject: Update on Natural Environment Work Program – New Regional Official Plan

Report to: Planning and Economic Development Committee

Report date: Wednesday, February 20, 2019

Recommendations

1. That Report PDS 10-2019 **BE RECEIVED** for information; and,
2. That Report PDS 10-2019 **BE CIRCULATED** to the Area Municipalities and the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority (NPCA).

Key Facts

- This purpose of this report is to provide an update on the natural environment work program for the new Regional Official Plan including background, work completed to date, and next steps.
- Natural environment planning is a complex and evolving science. There is a wide range of changing Provincial requirements, guidance, and direction; scientific and technical requirements; industry best practices; and local context that must be taken into consideration.
- Natural environment planning is highly-integrated with agricultural system planning. Both natural environment and agricultural systems are foundations of the new Regional Official Plan.
- PDS 6-2018 was the Project Initiation Report for the natural environment work program. The report was presented to Planning and Economic Development Committee on January 31, 2018 and sought direction to begin the consultation program and to prepare a more detailed project framework.
- PDS 18-2018 was the detailed project framework for the natural environment work program, and was endorsed by Planning and Economic Development Committee on April 25, 2018.

Financial Considerations

The costs associated with the natural environment work program can be accommodated within the Council approved Regional Official Plan project budget.

Analysis

Background

Since approval in 1973, first as the Regional Policy Plan, the Regional Official Plan has not been comprehensively updated. The historical structure of the Regional Official Plan never contemplated the comprehensive long range planning guidance required by the current contemporary Provincial planning requirements. A new Regional Official Plan that reflects Provincial Policy and up-to-date current planning practice is required.

By approval of Report PDS 40-2016, Council endorsed the approach of the preparation of a new Regional Official Plan from start to finish rather than a series of site specific topic amendments.

Subsequently, PDS 41-2017 outlined eight background studies that needed to be initiated as a first priority towards the development of the new Regional Official Plan. Four of these are generally classified as they relate to growth: land needs assessment, employment lands strategy, urban structure, and a regional housing strategy. The remaining four are generally classified as resource and environment related: aggregates, climate change, agriculture, and natural environment.

PDS 6-2018 was the project initiation report for the natural environment work program and sought direction to consult with Area Planners and local municipal planning staff. During that consultation process the scope, methodology, and key issues to be incorporated in the work program were confirmed. PDS 18-2018 provided a summary of the early consultation process; framework for the work program moving forward; an outline of the proposed consultation and engagement process; and a schedule for reporting to Committee and Council. That reporting scheduled identified that a status report on the project would be made in Q1 2019.

Scope

Through early consultation with the Area Planners group and other stakeholders the scope of the natural environment work program was refined and confirmed. The natural environment work program will include evaluation and consideration of:

- Natural Heritage Features:
 - All features as identified in the PPS (Provincial Policy Statement) and Provincial Plans including woodlands, wetlands, wildlife habitat, habitat of endangered and threatened species, fish habitat, significant valleylands, etc.

- Hydrologic Features:
 - All features as identified in the PPS and Provincial Plans including streams, seepage areas, wetlands, etc.
 - Significant work to date on the Region's watercourse identification and mapping project (known as the "contemporary mapping of watercourses")
- Water Resource Systems:
 - Groundwater systems
 - Surface water systems
- Natural Hazards:
 - All features as identified in the PPS and Provincial Plans including flooding hazards, erosion hazards, and dynamic beach hazards, etc.
 - Wildland Fires as per Section 3.1.8 of the PPS.
- Provincial Natural Heritage Systems:
 - Greenbelt Natural Heritage System and Urban River Valley designation
 - Growth Plan Natural Heritage System
- Niagara Escarpment Plan as it relates to the municipal planning process
- Watershed Planning & Stormwater Management

Although there will be a connection with some of the 'in scope' items, this project will not result in the development of Official Plan policies related to:

- Aggregates & Petroleum Resources
- Source Water Protection

Framework for Natural Environment Work Program

As outlined previously in further detail in PDS 18-2018, the natural environment work program will be undertaken as follows. A consulting team has now been retained to undertake Phases 2-6 and to support Region staff with Phase 7 and 8. Phase 9, which is the development of other implementation tools is outside of this work program and will be considered once the Regional Official Plan policies have been developed and endorsed.

- Phase 1 - Project Initiation and Procurement
- Phase 2 - Background Study and Discussion Papers for Mapping and Watershed Planning Priority Areas
- Phase 3 - 1st Point of Engagement: Inform on Background Study
- Phase 4 - Develop Options for the Natural System(s)

- Phase 5 - 2nd Point of Engagement: Consultation on Options for the Natural System(s)
- Phase 6 - Develop Regional Natural System(s)
- Phase 7 - Develop Official Plan Policies & Finalize Mapping
- Phase 8 - 3rd Point of Engagement: Draft OP Policies and Schedules
- Phase 9 – Other Implementation Tools

Work Completed to Date

Since the endorsement of PDS 18-2018, Region staff have completed Phase 1 of the work program which included: preparing a request for proposal (RFP) document, undertaking a procurement process, and retaining a consulting team. A Technical Advisory Group (TAG) comprising of local, NPCA, and provincial planning staff has also been formed.

Phase 2 of the work program is well underway and has included a meeting of the TAG as well as several meetings with a mapping working group which was formed to support the development of the high-priority mapping discussion paper.

Next Steps

The next steps in the work program are the completion of mapping and watershed planning discussion papers, followed by the comprehensive background study. These studies will provide the necessary background information for the system and policy development and are the foundation of the work program moving forward.

Following this is the 1st major point of engagement with the full range of stakeholders. The purpose of this point of engagement is to educate and share the findings of the background studies. Public open houses and presentations to local councils will also be completed during the 1st point of engagement.

Alternatives Reviewed

N/A

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The natural environment work program is part of the new Regional Official Plan which will assist in implementing Council's Strategic Priority of Innovation, Investment, & Entrepreneurship.

Other Pertinent Reports

- PDS 40-2016 – Regional Official Plan Update
- PDS 41-2017 – New Official Plan Structure and Framework
- PDS 3-2018 – New Official Plan Update
- PDS 6-2018 – Natural Environment Project Initiation Report
- PDS 18-2018 – Natural Environment – Project Framework

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