



Report to: Development Services Committee

Meeting Date: July 5, 2023

SUBJECT: Proposed Natural Heritage Policies of the Provincial Planning Statement

PREPARED BY: Patrick Wong, Acting Manager, Natural Heritage, MCIP, RPP
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RECOMMENDATION:

1. That the July 5, 2023 report titled “Proposed Natural Heritage Policies of the Provincial Planning Statement” be received;
2. That the Province of Ontario be advised that the City of Markham has no concerns with the proposed natural heritage policies of the Provincial Planning Statement;
3. That the Province of Ontario be requested to review and update their natural heritage guidelines to support the implementation of the Provincial Planning Statement;
4. That this report be forwarded to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing as the City of Markham’s comments on the proposed natural heritage policies of the Provincial Planning Statement; and,
5. That Staff be authorized and directed to do all things necessary to give effect to this resolution

PURPOSE:

This report provides staff comments on the natural heritage sections of the proposed Provincial Planning Statement that were released for comment on June 16, 2023.

BACKGROUND:

On April 6, 2023, the Province released the draft Provincial Planning Statement for public consultation. The proposed Provincial Planning Statement is planned to replace both the existing *Provincial Policy Statement, 2020* and the *A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2020*.

Development Services Committee received a [staff report](#) on May 30, 2023 regarding the proposed Provincial Planning Statement. At the time of that staff report, the natural heritage policies and related definitions were still under consideration by the Province and were not released for consultation. On May 30, 2023, the Province extended the consultation period to August 4, 2023 and on June 16, 2023, the Province [released the natural heritage sections](#) of the proposed Provincial Planning Statement for public review.

OPTIONS/ DISCUSSION:

The Province proposes to replace the Provincial Policy Statement and the Growth Plan with the proposed Provincial Planning Statement

Under Section 3 of the *Planning Act*, the Province may issue policy statements and provincial plans to guide municipal planning policy and decision making. The two policy documents under review through the provincial consultation are the *Provincial Policy Statement, 2020* (“PPS 2020”) and the *A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2020* (“Growth Plan”):

The PPS 2020 provides policy direction on land use planning matters across Ontario including growth and development, infrastructure planning, protection of public health and safety, and management of natural and cultural resources. Planning decisions shall be consistent with the policies of the PPS 2020.

The Growth Plan builds on the guidance of the Provincial Policy Statement and provides more detailed policy direction to manage growth and build complete communities in the Greater Golden Horseshoe region. It encourages intensification and the efficient use of land while supporting integrated infrastructure/transportation planning. The Growth Plan is implemented through municipal official plans, which shall conform to the Growth Plan.

The Province proposes to replace both the PPS 2020 and the Growth Plan with the proposed Provincial Planning Statement. This report provides comments on the recent natural heritage changes.

The proposed Provincial Planning Statement maintains similar levels of natural heritage protection

The Province proposes to maintain the existing natural heritage policies and definitions in the proposed Provincial Planning Statement. These existing policies require municipalities like Markham to continue to protect significant natural heritage features as part of a linked natural heritage system (Markham’s Greenway System). The natural heritage policies of the PPS 2020 have been an important tool to support the City’s efforts to protect and enhance the natural environment. The City has low natural cover (8% woodland cover and 3% wetland cover) which is largely the result of early pioneer settlement in the 1800s and 1900s requiring the clear cutting of forests for agricultural activities. The protection of remaining natural features is critical to meeting the City’s environmental goals and objectives including the 30% tree canopy target. The PPS 2020 supports the City’s ability to protect and buffer the natural features that remain on the landscape from development. The proposed Provincial Planning Statement would also maintain existing definitions with some minor housekeeping updates to change/remove Ministry names.

The policies in the proposed Provincial Planning Statement are considered to be minimum standards and municipalities are permitted to establish higher standards to address local municipal priorities and objectives. The City’s Official Plan generally goes above the provincial minimum standard to protect locally important natural heritage features such as woodlots, wetlands and the Rouge Watershed Protection Area. Staff are supportive of maintaining the existing natural heritage policies in the proposed Provincial Planning Statement.

The Natural Heritage System in the Growth Plan is not being carried forward in the Provincial Planning Statement

In the 2017 update to the Growth Plan, the Province introduced a provincial Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan to protect certain ecological lands outside of the Greenbelt Plan area and to provide environmental protections similar to those provided by the Greenbelt Plan. The proposed revocation of the Growth Plan would result in the removal of the Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan (Growth Plan NHS) as well as associated policies for protection.

The vast majority of the Growth Plan NHS will remain protected within the City's Greenway System (see Figure 1). While the Growth Plan NHS includes approximately 6.3 ha of land outside of the Markham Greenway System, the removal of the Growth Plan NHS is not expected to have major implications to the City of Markham. The 6.3 ha of land in the Growth Plan NHS, but not in the Markham Greenway System, generally consists of 30 metre buffer zones around natural features. These buffer zones are expected to be verified and designated as part of the Greenway System, as appropriate, as part of future Secondary Plan processes.

The majority of the Growth Plan NHS (5.9 ha, see Figure 1) were brought into the New Community Area through the Province's approval of the York Region Official Plan, 2022. When these lands were brought into the urban settlement area boundary, the Growth Plan NHS policies ceased to apply (section 4.2.2.4). The natural heritage policies of the Markham Official Plan apply to these lands which provide a similar or greater level of protection to natural heritage features when compared to the Growth Plan NHS.

As a result of the approval of the York Region Official Plan, 2022, Markham only retains a small area of whitebelt land located generally in the two concession blocks bound by Markham Road, 9th Line, Major Mackenzie Drive and 19th Ave. This includes approximately 0.3 ha which are identified in the Growth Plan NHS (see Figure 1). In staff's opinion, the natural heritage policies of the Markham/York Official Plan are stronger than the Growth Plan NHS and the deletion of the Growth Plan NHS will not impact the City's ability to protect significant natural heritage features. Further, should these lands be urbanized in the future (for beyond the 2051 planning horizon), the Growth Plan NHS policies would no longer have applied.

Provincial guidance is necessary to effectively implement natural heritage policies

The proposed Provincial Planning Statement is intended to be supported by technical guidelines. These documents establish province-wide criteria and thresholds to assess natural heritage features. They help municipalities to identify natural feature boundaries and to determine which natural features are to be protected.

In the past, municipalities like Markham were able to rely upon conservation authorities who provided technical advice across multiple jurisdictions. Many conservation authorities authored their own science-based guidelines to help municipalities undertake natural heritage planning (e.g., Terms of Reference for technical studies, natural heritage strategies and ecological compensation guidelines). As municipalities start to [take on](#)

[increased responsibilities](#) for natural heritage planning, it will be important to have access to up-to-date and defensible provincial guidance on natural heritage planning.

A number of technical guidelines prepared in support of the Provincial Planning Statement have not been updated in many years. In particular, the Significant Wildlife Habitat Technical Guide (2000) and the Natural Heritage Reference Manual (2010) are both foundational guidelines for natural heritage planning in Ontario, and staff recommend that they be reviewed and updated to support implementation of the proposed Provincial Planning Statement.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Not applicable.

HUMAN RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS

Not applicable.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

The Provincial Planning Statement supports the protection of natural heritage features and greenspace which is aligned with the “Safe, Sustainable & Complete Communities” strategic priority.

BUSINESS UNITS CONSULTED AND AFFECTED:

Not applicable.

RECOMMENDED BY:

Darryl Lyons, MCIP, RPP
Deputy Director, Planning & Urban Design

Arvin Prasad, MCIP, RPP
Commissioner, Development Services

ATTACHMENTS:

Figure 1 – Provincial Natural Heritage System in Markham

Figure 1 – Provincial Natural Heritage System in Markham

