



Report to: Development Services Committee

Date: September 25, 2017

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**SUBJECT:** Comments on Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe

**PREPARED BY:** Lilli Duoba, Manager, Natural Heritage, Extension 7925

**REVIEWED BY:** Marg Wouters, Senior Manager, Policy and Research, Extension 2909

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

1. That the staff report entitled "Comments on Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Greater Golden Horseshoe and Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe" dated September 25, 2017, be received;
2. That this staff report and Council resolution be forwarded to the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF), Ontario Ministry of Agricultural, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and Region of York as Council's comments on EBR registry postings 013-1014 and 013-0968;
3. And further that staff be authorized and directed to do all things necessary to give effect to this resolution.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

On July 6, 2017 the MNRF and OMAFRA released two documents through the Environmental Registry (EBR). These include:

1. Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods (GGH Natural Heritage System)
2. Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH Agricultural System)

Staff recommendations on the comments on the 'Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods' are that the Province revisit the five recommended inclusions to the GGH NHS. Sites 1, 2 and 5 should be reviewed to ensure only the appropriate feature is captured in the GGH NHS. Staff recommend the Province review sites 3 and 4 which appear to not include any natural heritage features.

Staff recommendations on the comments on the 'Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe' are that we support the Province leaving the mapping as draft until the Region's Municipal Comprehensive Review is complete.

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**PURPOSE:**

The purpose of this report is to provide comments on the Province's 'Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods' and 'Implementation Procedure for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe' and identify implications for Markham.

**BACKGROUND:**

On July 6, 2017 the MNRF and OMAFRA released two documents through the Environmental Registry (EBR). These include:

3. Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods (GGH Natural Heritage System)
4. Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH Agricultural System)

The documents were prepared by the Province as implementation tools to help inform the new policy requirements in the 2017 Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (Growth Plan). Policy 4.2.2 of the Growth Plan provides that the Province will map a Natural Heritage System (NHS) for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (GGH) and provide policies requiring municipalities to incorporate the Natural Heritage System into applicable local Official Plans and prepare policies for the protection of the GGH Natural Heritage System. Policy 4.2.6 of the Growth Plan provides that the Province will identify an Agricultural System for the GGH and provide policies requiring municipalities to designate and protect 'prime agricultural areas' and 'specialty crop areas'.

Comments on the proposed documents and associated mapping are due to the Province on October 4, 2017.

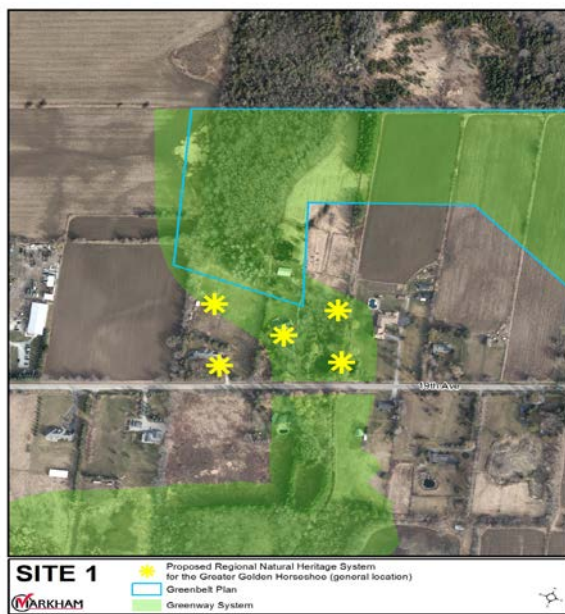
**DISCUSSION:****Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods (GGH NHS)**

The Proposed GGH NHS document provides a definition and overview of the NHS and provides principles, criteria and methods to be used by the Province to delineate the GGH Natural Heritage System. This GGH NHS applies only to lands outside of settlement areas and outside of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan (ORMCP) area and Greenbelt Plan (GP) area (referred to as 'whitebelt' lands in Markham). The Natural Heritage Systems in the ORMCP and GP have been delineated and finalized with the release of the applicable Provincial Plans.

The criteria used to establish the GGH Natural Heritage System consists of core areas, linkages, river valleys and natural features adjacent to the Greenbelt Plan boundary. There are no core areas or linkages identified in Markham. The Province is using a minimum size criteria of 100 ha for core areas and there are no such lands which meet the size criteria in Markham. Linkages proposed by the Province to connect core areas are identified at 500 m in width and none are proposed in Markham. Figure 1 identifies the proposed GGH Natural Heritage System (also identified in the link provided in Appendix A).

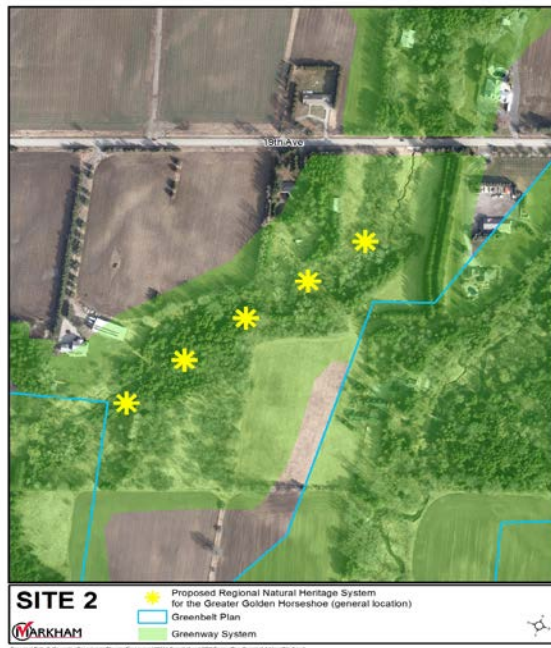
The proposed GGH NHS mapping identifies 5 natural heritage locations in Markham comprising river valleys and natural features. Given the scale of mapping provided by the Province, these sites are shown conceptually and the exact boundary cannot be confirmed at this time. Figure 2 identifies the sites in Markham.

**Site 1:** Adjacent to the Greenbelt north of 19<sup>th</sup> Ave. between Kennedy Rd and McCowan Rd



### Site 1

These lands are already identified Greenway System in Markham's Official Plan 2014 and comprise floodplain, a watercourse stream feature and wetlands. Inclusion of these lands in the GGH Natural Heritage System would be consistent with the protection policies provided for in the Official Plan. The Province is encouraged to review their proposed boundary to ensure only the features are included.

**Site 2:** NE of Greenbelt south of 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue between McCowan Rd and Highway 48**Site 2**

These lands are already identified Greenway System in the Official Plan and appear to comprise floodplain, a watercourse/steam feature, woodlands and wetlands. Inclusion of these lands in the GGH Natural Heritage System would be consistent with the protection policies provided for in the Official Plan. The Province is encouraged to review their proposed boundary to ensure the feature in its entirety is included.

**Site 3:** Adjacent to Greenbelt at Little Rouge Creek east of McCowan Road between Elgin Mills and 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue**Site 3**

These lands are currently not identified in the Greenway System of the Official Plan. The City's Greenway System matches the Greenbelt boundary at this location. The Province is encouraged to revisit this site and confirm its applicability as part of the GGH NHS.

**Site 4:** East of the Greenbelt at Little Rouge Creek east of Highway 48 between Major Mackenzie Drive and Elgin Mills Road



**Site 4**

These lands are currently not identified in the Greenway System of the Official Plan. The City's Greenway System matches the Greenbelt boundary at this location. There are no watercourse or other features associated with this site. We note the area reflects the narrowest portion of the creek corridor. The Province is encouraged to revisit this site and confirm its applicability as part of the GGH NHS.

**Site 5:** North of Greenbelt south of Elgin Mills and east of Highway 48



**Site 5**

These lands are identified in the Greenway System of the Official Plan and appear to comprise floodplain, a watercourse/stream feature, woodlands and wetlands. The lands follow the CN Rail corridor and form an incomplete linkage from the Little Rouge Creek on the south and the Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP) to the north. The Province may wish to extend the lands approximately 130 metres to complete the linkage to the RNUP.

**Additional Lands**

In reviewing the GGH Natural Heritage System staff note that while some natural heritage features adjacent to the Greenbelt lands were included, other natural features were not. The data used by the Province is based on the Southern Ontario Land Resources Information System (SOLRIS) which is a landscape-level (watershed scale) inventory of vegetation communities which may not fully capture smaller natural features. The Province may wish to review more recent revisions to their wetland and



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woodland data layers to ensure that provincially significant features adjacent to the Greenbelt Plan area which meet the criteria for inclusion in the GGH Natural Heritage System are duly considered.

**Criteria and Methods**

Staff technical comments on the 'Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods' are identified on Appendix C.

**Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe Information Report (GGH Agricultural System)**

This document explains the Agricultural System approach and describes the province's process for identifying the agricultural land base as the process for municipal refinements. The document also describes the components of the agri-food network. The Agricultural System is intended to apply to lands in the GGH. The document is attached as a link in Appendix 'B'.

The Agricultural System mapping will be released by the province following current consultations. The province has released draft mapping through their web portal which reflects current agricultural classifications identified through Official Plans and/or identified by OMAFRA as well as Candidate Areas for the Agricultural Land Base (see Figure 3). In Markham, the mapping reflects the land base as approved in the Regional Official Plan and Markham Official Plans (current 1987, as amended and 2014, as partially approved on October 30, 2015, May 26, 2016, March 10, 2017 and April 21, 2017). All non-urban land in Markham has been classified as 'prime agricultural lands' as determined through the Regional LEAR exercise undertaken in 2009. A LEAR (Land Evaluation and Area Review) is the study undertaken under Provincial guidance to determine agricultural land classifications consistent with the Provincial Policy Statement.

The Agricultural Land Base mapping to be provided by the Province may be refined by the Region through their Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) process. The guideline identifies a broad consultation process with stakeholders, local municipalities and appropriate provincial ministries for any refinement exercise of the Agricultural Land Base. Staff support the Province leaving the mapping as draft until the Region's Municipal Comprehensive Review is complete.

**CONCLUSION:**

Staff recommendations on the comments on the 'Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods' are that the Province revisit the five recommended inclusions to the GGH NHS. Sites 1, 2 and 5 should be reviewed to ensure only the appropriate feature is captured in the GGH NHS. Staff recommend the Province review sites 3 and 4 which appear to not include any natural heritage features.

Staff recommendations on the comments on the Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe are that we support the Province leaving the mapping as draft until the Region's Municipal Comprehensive Review is complete.

**FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND TEMPLATE:**

There are no financial implications related to the recommendations of this report.

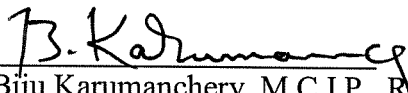
**ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:**


The Provincial Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan supports the City's efforts to provide improved protection of the agricultural land base, natural features and green spaces as components of a linked natural heritage system.

**BUSINESS UNITS CONSULTED AND AFFECTED:**

There are no implications to external Departments. Staff have attended a Region of York meeting and Provincial consultation on this matter.

**RECOMMENDED BY:**

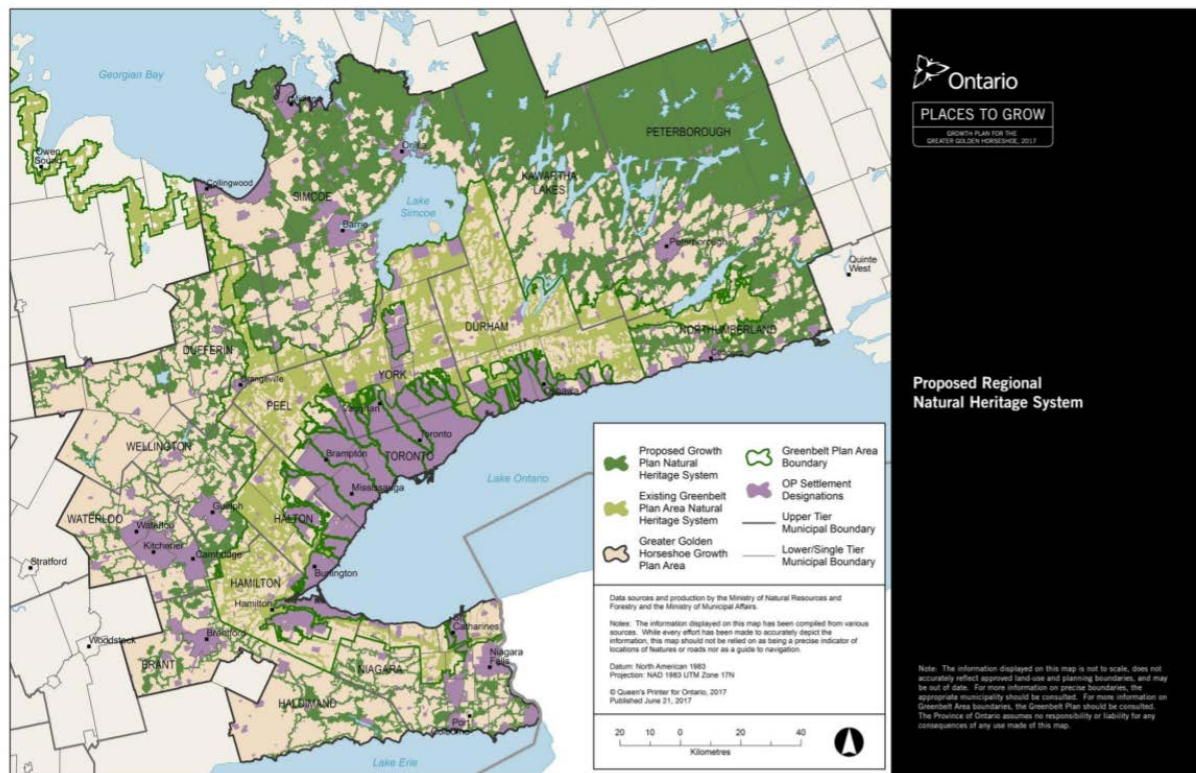
  
Biju Karumanchery, M.C.I.P., R.P.P.  
Director of Planning and Urban Design

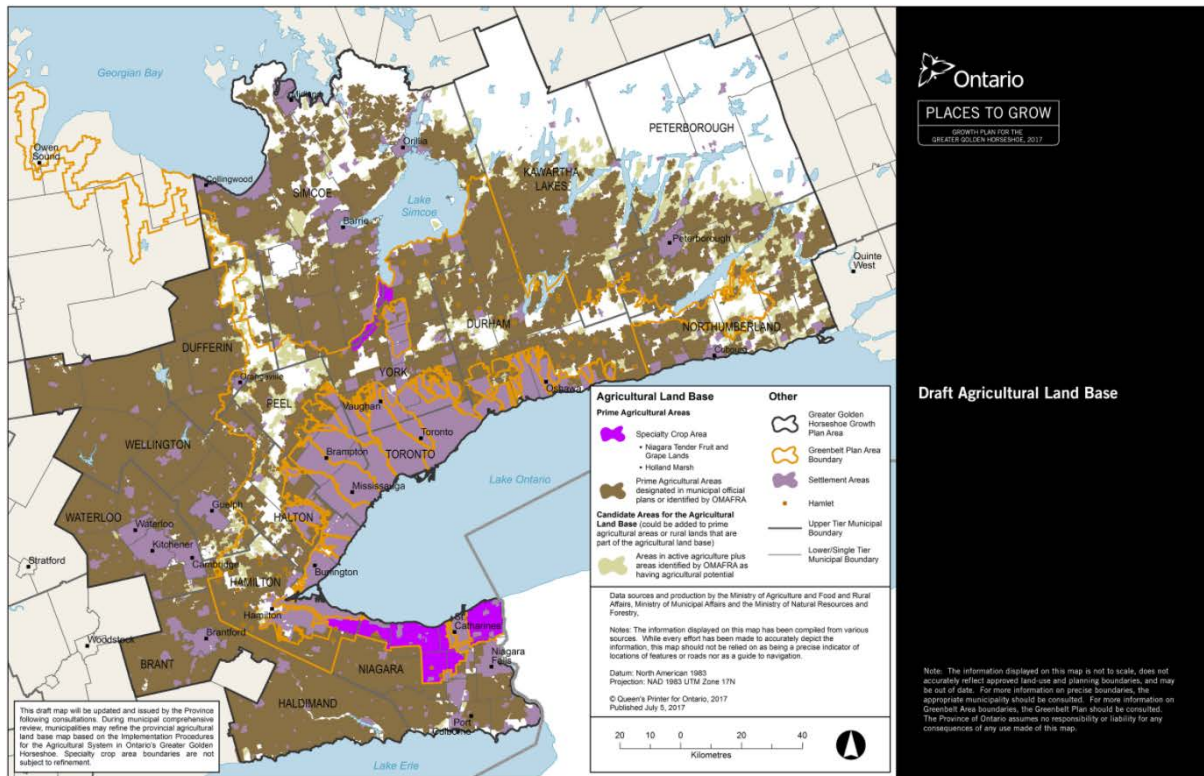
  
Jim Baird, M.C.I.P., R.P.P.  
Commissioner of Development Services

**ATTACHMENTS:**

Figure 1:	Proposed GGH Natural Heritage System
Figure 2:	Proposed GGH Natural Heritage System Lands in Markham
Figure 3:	Proposed Provincial Agricultural System Mapping
Appendix 'A':	Link to 'Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe'
Appendix 'B':	Link to 'Implementation Procedures for the Agricultural System in Ontario's Greater Golden Horseshoe'
Appendix 'C':	Technical Comments on the 'Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods'
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**Figure 1: Proposed GGH Natural Heritage System****Figure 2: Proposed GGH Natural Heritage System Lands in Markham**

**Figure 3: Proposed Provincial Agricultural System Mapping**

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**Appendix A:** <http://apps.mnr.gov.on.ca/public/files/er/growth-plan-regional-nhs-mapping-summary.pdf>

**Appendix B:** <http://omafra.gov.on.ca/english/landuse/improc.pdf>

**Appendix C:** Staff Technical Comments on ‘Development of the Proposed Regional Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe: Summary of Criteria and Methods’ (June 28, 2017)

1. Core area criteria are of a scale that precludes any consideration in Markham. However, greater clarity on the application of 50% natural cover to the 100 ha and 500 ha core areas would be helpful. For instance, how would the 50% natural cover be applied relative the size criteria?
2. Linkage criteria are directly associated with the core areas and as such would not apply in Markham. Linkages are perhaps the most challenging aspect of any Natural Heritage System to implement, and consideration should be given to ensuring the linkage size corresponds to its intended function. There may be site conditions and target species that would support a linkage of less than 500 m in width.
3. Staff understand that a number of linkages are centered on watercourses and river valleys. The Province may wish to review Conservation Authority mapping for hazard lands to further refine the delineation of linkages.
4. Staff understand that the SOLRIS data is current to 2011. The Province may wish to review the most recent revisions to its wetland and woodland data layers to determine if they meet the criteria for inclusion in the GGH Natural Heritage System.