

## Report PDR-PCD-27-14

**To:** Chair Wright and Members of the Planning and Community Development Committee  
**From:** Scott Taylor, Senior Planner  
**Meeting Date:** July 22, 2014  
**Subject:** **Request for Proposals on the Natural Heritage Systems Study**  
**Status:** Recommendation adopted by Committee as presented per Resolution PCD89-14; Endorsed by County Council August 5, 2014 per Resolution CC115-14;

### Recommendation(s)

**WHEREAS the County Official Plan currently recognizes a number of significant natural heritage features;**

**AND WHEREAS the Provincial Policy Statement requires the identification of 'Natural Heritage Systems';**

**AND WHEREAS the County currently has \$100,000 budgeted for the completion of a Natural Heritage Systems Study;**

**NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that Report PDR-PCD-27-14 be received;**

**AND THAT staff will circulate the draft Request for Proposals on the completion of the Natural Heritage Systems Study to conservation authorities with jurisdiction in the County, and to the County's member municipalities for their review and comment;**

**AND THAT following the conservation authority and municipal review, staff will issue the Request for Proposals as per the County's purchasing policies.**

### Background

Within the County Official Plan a number of natural environmental features are mapped including Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSW's), significant woodlands, Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI's), other identified wetlands, and watercourses. Further related mapping is also provided through the County's Hazard Lands mapping,

conservation authority's regulated areas mapping, and protected areas within the Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP). Beyond the mapped features, further protection via the County Official Plan and the *Endangered Species Act* is also provided for threatened and endangered species and their associated habitats. Overall the County currently provides protection to large portions of its 'natural heritage', and these protections have increased in recent years with Official Plan Amendment (OPA) 80 and changes to the *Endangered Species Act*. In previous discussions with Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) staff, MNR has estimated that the County is already protecting 90+% of what we need to be protecting under the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS).

While the County Plan maps and protects the above-noted features, the development review process often gives little consideration to how these feature 'fit together' to form a natural heritage system (NHS). In some cases the connections or linkages between significant environmental features may be crucial to how these features ecologically function. In other cases where a feature is isolated on the landscape it may provide less ecological function than an otherwise connected feature would.

It is important to note here that when one considers an environmental feature, it does not necessarily mean an 'untouched' old-growth forest or pristine natural watercourse, though it could include such features. Environmental features which have been disturbed by human habitation, or altered in otherwise 'unnatural ways' can still play a role in the overall NHS. In some cases key habitat can be found within farmed areas, hedgerows, or early regeneration forests or meadows. The key to evaluating the overall importance of such features is determining the function they play within the NHS.

Crucial to the health of Grey County is also striking a balance between the protection of the natural environment, and the need to permit growth and resource use. Few would argue with the need to protect the natural environment for the health of all species and its intrinsic value. However, in considering any environmental protection, the County needs to be cognizant of the agricultural, forestry, aggregate, tourism, and development sectors. While the County has an abundant amount of 'natural beauty', for which we market ourselves, we cannot neglect the economic development needs for existing and future landowners. In short, we must strive to achieve a balance between a healthy natural environment, making the County a scenic tourist destination, and providing for economic opportunities for our residents.

For a number of years now the County Planning department has had the NHS study as a capital line item within the budget at a value of \$100,000. This project, which is partially funded through development charges, was due to be initiated in 2012; however County staff have struggled with an appropriate methodology. Over the past few years the County has been consulting with municipal, conservation authority, and provincial staff to determine what a 'made-in-Grey' methodology would look like. Planning staff have reviewed similar such studies from other parts of the province, including studies

completed by the Upper Thames River Conservation Authority (UTRCA). County staff are of the understanding that the Province has generally accepted the UTRCA methodology; however such a methodology would need to be 'tweaked' to reflect conditions within Grey County. The draft Request for Proposals (RFP) found in the 'Attachments' section of this report references UTRCA methodology, but stresses the need for a 'made-in-Grey' approach.

### *Provincial Policy Statement 2014*

The 2014 PPS now contains stronger wording with respect to NHS planning in Ontario. While the previous 2005 PPS strongly recommended NHS planning as the ecologically sound way of considering natural heritage features, the 2014 PPS now requires NHS planning. Specifically section 2.1.3 of the PPS 2014 states;

*“Natural heritage systems shall be identified in Ecoregions 6E & 7E, recognizing that natural heritage systems will vary in size and form in settlement areas, rural areas and prime agricultural areas.”*

All of south-western Ontario is found within Ecoregions 6E & 7E, and as such the identification of a NHS is required for Grey County.

The PPS defines 'natural heritage systems' as follows:

*“means a system made up of natural heritage features and areas, and linkages intended to provide connectivity (at the regional or site level) and support natural processes which are necessary to maintain biological and geological diversity, natural functions, viable populations of indigenous species, and ecosystems. These systems can include natural heritage features and areas, federal and provincial parks and conservation reserves, other natural heritage features, lands that have been restored or have the potential to be restored to a natural state, areas that support hydrologic functions, and working landscapes that enable ecological functions to continue. The Province has a recommended approach for identifying natural heritage systems, but municipal approaches that achieve or exceed the same objective may also be used.”*

While it is clear that the PPS requires the identification of a NHS, it is also clear from the PPS that NHS's will vary across the Province, based on geographic differences. The Province offers some guidance on the identification of NHS's through their Natural Heritage Reference Manual publication, which was most recently updated in 2010, but also allows for municipal approaches which achieve the same objective. As such, although the County is being required to complete a NHS, County staff view some flexibility here to create a 'made-in-Grey' approach which balances the needs for environmental protection, economic development and resource use. The draft RFP

strives to maintain this balance. Specifically sections 3 and 4 of the RFP outline the terms of reference and evaluation criteria for the NHS study.

Following the Planning and Community Development Committee's review of the draft RFP, the RFP will then be shared with municipal and conservation authority staff for their review and comment, prior to issuing the RFP for bids. Following the completion of the NHS study, the County would then look at updating the County Official Plan at the time of the next five year review or through a housekeeping amendment.

## Financial / Staffing / Legal / Information Technology

### Considerations

The County has budgeted \$92,500 in the five year capital to cover the cost of the NHS study. A small amount of this money has already been spent on researching and training related to this project. The RFP makes reference to the budgeted amount and the County would expect submissions to come in at, or below this dollar value.

Additional monies may be needed when it comes time to implement the recommendations of the NHS study into the County Official Plan, but this could be paired with other amendments through the next five year review or a housekeeping amendment to minimize costs.

The County also hopes to draw on local expertise at the municipal and conservation authority level, to aid in completing this project and to avoid any duplicative efforts.

### Link to Strategic Goals / Priorities

A project of this nature has the ability to touch on a number of goals from the County's Corporate Strategic Plan, including goals 2, 4, and 5. Through this project the County will strive to work collaboratively with stakeholders, municipal, conservation authority and provincial staff, to ensure that the NHS is reflective of the diverse needs of the community.

### Attachments

[Draft Natural Heritage Systems Study Request for Proposals](#)

Respectfully submitted by,

Scott Taylor, MCIP, RPP  
Senior Planner

Director Sign Off: *Randy Scherzer*

