

# **Municipal Interest in Parks and Protected Area Research**

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Municipalities have two major interests in parks and protected area research: 1) Official Plan policy development; and, 2) the evaluation of planning applications. The focus of this presentation is Official Plan policy development as it relates to the protection of natural features and functions in the Region of Halton.

The Region of Halton is located on the western end of the Greater Toronto Area. The Greater Toronto Area includes the new City of Toronto, Region of Durham, Region of York, Region of Peel and the Region of Halton. The Niagara Escarpment crosses the Halton landscape and represents approximately one third of the land area of Halton. There are four urban communities in Halton (Burlington, Oakville, Milton, Georgetown and Acton), a large agricultural area below the Niagara Escarpment, and a large rural area including many wetlands on top of the Escarpment. The Region is currently proposing to expand the urban areas as a result of a major study called the Halton Urban Structure Plan. The Halton Urban Structure Plan is the Region's long term growth strategy. It includes a comprehensive analysis of natural features and functions through the preparation of the 16 Mile Creek Watershed study.

## ***Official Plan Policy Development***

Municipalities are required to have Official Plans that describe the policies on how land in the community is to be used. Official Plans must address matters of Provincial Interest including the protection of Natural Areas as identified in the Provincial Policy Statement. The *Planning Act* also requires municipal councils to review their Official Plans every five years.

Municipalities are required by the Planning Act to have regard for matters of Provincial Interest including "the protection of ecological systems, including natural areas, features and functions" when making decisions about changes in land use. The Provincial Policy Statement requires municipalities to:

- define natural features and areas including: habitat of endangered and threatened species; wetlands; valleylands; woodlands; Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs); fish habitat; and, wildlife habitat; and,
- prohibit development and site alteration in significant wetlands south and east of the Canadian Shield and in significant portions of the habitat of endangered and threatened species.

However, municipalities also may:

- permit development and site alteration in fish habitat, significant woodlands, significant valleylands, significant wildlife habitat and ANSIs if it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts on the natural features or ecological functions for which the area is identified;
- permit development and site alteration on adjacent lands if it has been demonstrated that there will be no negative impact on the natural features or on the ecological functions for which the area is identified; and

- maintain and improve the diversity of natural features in an area, and the natural connections among them.

Most municipalities need assistance with the identification of the natural features and ecological functions within their communities. This assistance may come from conservation authorities, Ministry of Natural Resources, Ecological and Environmental Advisory Committees, naturalist groups and consultants. Some of the information (e.g. Provincially Significant Wetlands, Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest) is currently available from the Ministry of Natural Resources. Information about significant valleylands, wildlife habitat and woodlands is often not available.

Any research that is conducted to address the natural heritage requirements of the Provincial Policy Statement needs to be scientifically valid, practical and easily understood by the public. The tools used to evaluate and present information about natural areas need to be appropriate to the individual municipality. Halton is very fortunate in that we have a fairly advanced Geographic Information System in place to create maps and conduct analysis of existing information from the Ministry of Natural Resources. Not all municipalities in Ontario have the same level of computer hardware, software and "know how" to use existing data and mapping that is available from the Province.

### ***The Region of Halton Official Plan***

The Region of Halton's Official Plan was approved in 1995, prior to the current 1996 *Planning Act* that requires the protection of ecological systems. Halton's Official Plan embraces the concept of protecting ecological systems by identifying a Greenlands System. The Greenlands System was based on work that was being conducted at the time by the Kanter Commission on Greenlands in the Greater Toronto Area and the work of the Waterfront Regeneration Trust. The Greenlands System includes policies for most of the major features that are required to be protected in the current Provincial Policy Statement, except for Woodlands. Woodlands are the subject of current research to identify criteria for assessing their significance in Halton.

The Greenlands System includes three components: *Greenlands A*, *Greenlands B* and *Escarpment Natural* designation. The *Greenlands A* designation includes Provincially Significant Wetlands and the Regulated Floodplain. The *Greenlands B* designation includes Environmentally Sensitive Areas, Public Open Space as identified in the Parkway Belt West Plan, Regionally Significant Wetlands, Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest, Carolinian Canada Sites and Halton Agreement Forests. *Escarpment Natural Areas* are the most significant natural areas within the Niagara Escarpment Plan.

There are other policies within the Regional Official Plan that address natural areas and ecological systems. The Official Plan requires the preparation of watershed and subwatershed studies in advance of development. Subwatershed studies include: inventories of natural features and functions; water quality targets; baseflows required to maintain water quality and existing ecological conditions; storm water management techniques; identification of constraints to development; and, monitoring procedures for water quality and quantity before, during and after development.

### ***Evaluation of Planning Applications***

Many municipalities do not have the expertise on staff to assess planning applications to determine if the applicant has demonstrated that there will be no negative impact on natural features or ecological functions of an area. To compensate for this, some rely on advice from conservation authorities, Environmental Advisory Committees or independent consultants on a case by case basis.

### ***Conclusions***

Communities need to find a better way to access parks and protected area research to use in the *Planning Act* requirements to protect natural areas. For example, Halton currently has a Masters student working on a thesis on identifying criteria to identify significant woodlands in Halton. We are also working with Bird Studies Canada to incorporate some of their research on the status of birds into the Greenlands System. In addition to having good information about natural features and functions, there is the important necessity of explaining it to the public. It is the public and the politicians who must be convinced about the importance of protecting natural areas. If the public and politicians do not understand why we need to protect natural areas we will have little success in incorporating policies into our Official Plans.