

# Planning for the Natural Environment

## DISCUSSION PAPER

As part of the  
Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville  
Official Plan Review  
DRAFT

March 2021



Re-Imagine Stouffville



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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Purpose of This Discussion Paper

The purpose of this Discussion Paper is to identify the opportunities for the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville (the Town) to protect and enhance its natural environment, while maintaining its unique rural character and balancing future growth management and the promotion of a healthy community. Planning for environmental sustainability is key to applying and promoting provincial interests as established in the *Planning Act*, the Provincial Policy Statement, 2020 (PPS, 2020) and A Place to Grow, Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe (2019), regional interests contemplated in the York Region Official Plan, and through detailed local planning policies in the Town's Official Plan.

This Discussion Paper presents preliminary policy recommendations that will implement the long-term vision of the new Town Official Plan and strategic directions that can be introduced by the Town at a corporate level to promote an environmentally aware community that protects and enhances its natural environment. This is a starting point for generating discussion about general policy issues as part of the OPR process. Feedback opportunities for a full range of stakeholders to provide input and insight on these policy issues will be available in Phase 2 of the project.

The information obtained will help formulate a series of Policy Direction Reports and the development of a brand new Official Plan and Schedules to implement the preferred policy directions and to address policy conformity gaps identified throughout the OPR.

The four Discussion Papers, in addition to the Community Visioning Report, completed in Phase 1, build on the five Focus Areas of the Official Plan Review, which are identified in Figure 1:

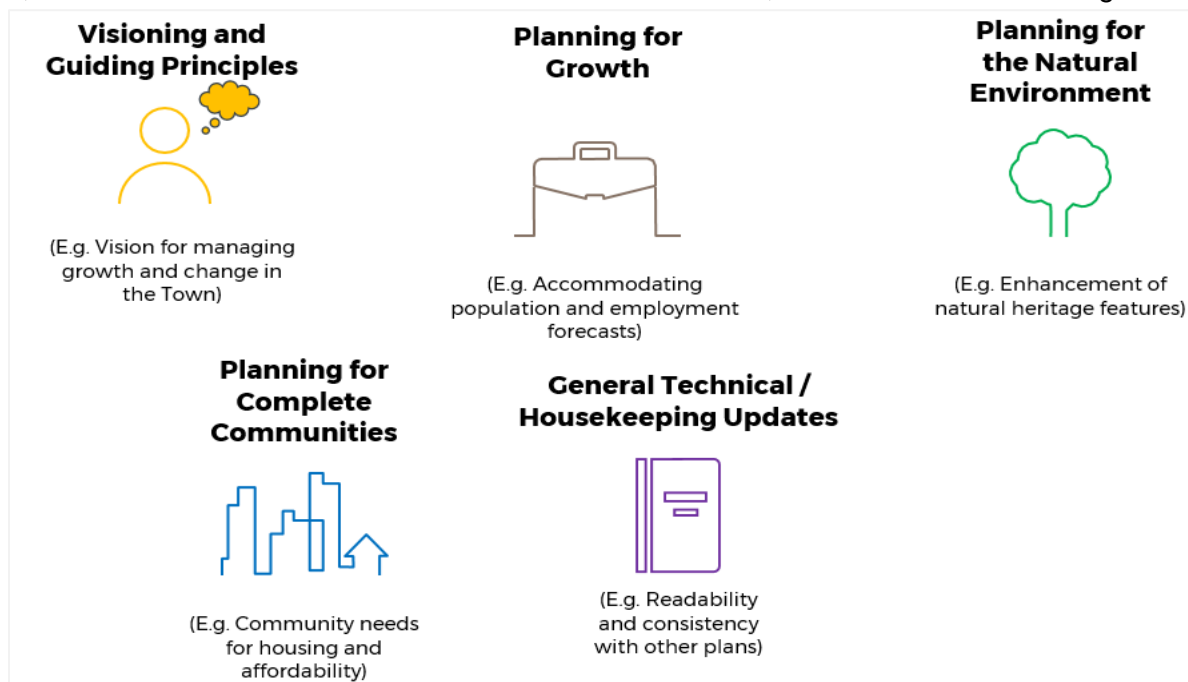


Figure 1: Focus Areas of the OPR



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## 1.2 What is an Official Plan

Official Plans are guided and developed under a framework established by the Province of Ontario to ensure that short- and long-term growth is coordinated in a manner to meet local social, economic, built and natural environment needs and aspirations. Municipal Official Plans must be consistent with the PPS, 2020 issued under the *Planning Act*, and must conform or not conflict with any applicable Provincial and Regional Plans, including the 2020 consolidated Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, the Greenbelt Plan, and the Region of York Official Plan, as they relate to the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville. These overarching policy documents provide direction to the Town on land use planning matters. Overall, Official Plan policies establish:

- Where new housing, industry, offices and shops will be located;
- What community services, such as roads, transportation, utilities, parks, trails and schools will be needed to accommodate growth and develop healthy and sustainable communities;
- Where, and in what order, parts of the community will grow;
- How to promote economic development and develop community improvement initiatives;
- How to protect and conserve cultural heritage resources; and
- How to protect the Town's agricultural lands and environmentally-sensitive areas.

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## 1.3 Why is the Town undertaking an Official Plan Review?

The OPR work program consists of four phases which are summarized in section 1.4 and will result in a detailed review and the preparation of a new Official Plan. The impetus for undertaking a review of the Town's Official Plan is predominantly three-fold:

- First, the Town is required to review its Official Plan in accordance with the requirements of the *Planning Act* to ensure consistency with the PPS, 2020 and to ensure conformity with the 2019, Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe, including Amendment 1 (2020), applicable Provincial Plans, and the Region of York Official Plan.
- Second, the Region of York initiated a work program in 2018 to undertake a Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR) to comprehensively implement the policies of the Growth Plan, and guide the Region's population and employment growth to 2051. The Town's Official Plan is required to be updated within one year of the approval of the Region's Official Plan.
- Lastly, the context within which the Town continues to evolve has changed since the current Official Plan was prepared and adopted (adopted in 1980, and last comprehensive update was in 2004).

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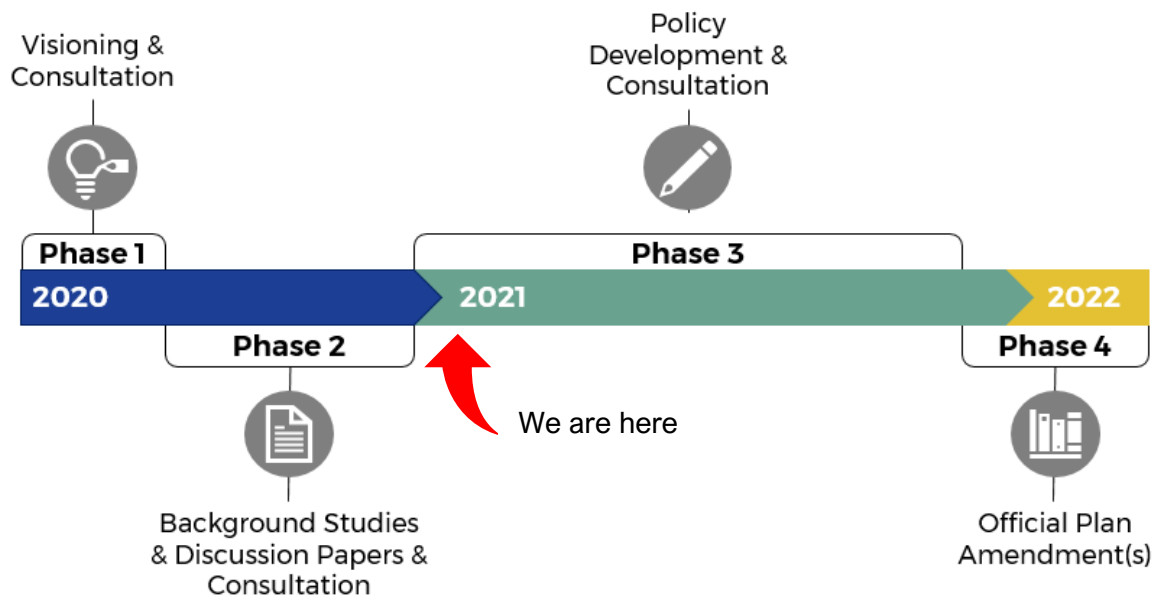
## 1.4 Official Plan Review Work Program

The OPR offers an opportunity to adopt contemporary land use and development policies that will guide growth and development over the planning horizon, and manage and direct physical change and the effects on the social, economic, built and natural environment of the Town.



The comprehensive OPR work program includes the following phases:

- **Phase 1: Visioning and Consultation** – will result in a community vision and guiding principles to inform future planning directions, by establishing what the community values and how the Town is envisioned to evolve over the planning horizon.
- **Phase 2: Background Studies and Discussion Papers** – will focus on data collection and the review of background information required to advance the OPR. This will involve the critical analysis of policy gaps, such as the need to conform to provincial and regional plans and policy, references to innovative implementation examples and appropriate energy and climate change considerations, etc. This phase will also involve the preparation of four Discussion Papers, in addition to the Community Visioning Report completed as part of Phase 1, to address the key themes related to growth management, the natural environment, healthy and complete communities, and general technical and housekeeping matters.
- **Phase 3: Policy Development** – will involve the preparation of Policy Directions Reports and the development of new and updated Official Plan policies to implement the preferred policy directions.
- **Phase 4: Draft New Official Plan** – will involve the technical writing, reviewing, evaluating, and implementing policies for the new Official Plan based on work completed to-date.



**Figure 2: Official Plan Review Timeline**

The Town’s OPR process allows for the opportunity to introduce strategies to further protect and enhance the long-term vitality of the natural environment. This will allow the residents and businesses of the Town to engage through meaningful thought and consideration to define how the Town should evolve over the next 25 years. Attention to the need to protect and enhance the natural environment will allow the Town to build on the values and principles that have allowed it



to become a desired community, while also recognizing the opportunities for improvement that can further promote a high quality of life.



## 2 NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN WHITCHURCH-STOUFFVILLE

In recent years, the Town has experienced a significant increase in overall population and business activity. Recognized as the third fastest growing community in Canada, and the second fastest growing in Ontario, the natural environment has continued to be an indicator in the shape and scale of development in the Town. Unique and irreplaceable landscapes, most notably being the Oak Ridges Moraine, has made most of the Town's lands undevelopable. This is not only consistent with the values of preserving the rural history and character of the Town, but also acknowledges the need for careful and focused growth to sustain the ecological functions and processes of the natural environment that continue to be an important aspect of the Town.

From a policy standpoint, the Town's Greenlands System, identified in Figure 3, is comprised of a network of interconnected natural features and areas such as wetlands, woodlands, valleylands, lakes and water courses. The Greenlands System is recognized and identified to help conserve and enhance biological diversity and ecological functions within the Town. Some ecological functions include but are not limited to movement corridors for wildlife, the protection of endangered species habitat. Also, the Natural Heritage System plays an important function on sustaining ecosystem services that we all depend on such as pollination, clean water, etc.



**Figure 3: Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Aerial View**

The abundance of natural areas in the Town presents a unique opportunity to balance, and integrate, a high-quality natural environment as part of the projected growth in the Town. The protection and enhancement of the natural environment, and its economic, social and health benefits, is viewed as a significant priority for residents, businesses and community organizations



alike. The natural environment not only allows for innovation in commerce, community development and recreation, but also the ability to proactively respond to current challenges including climate change that cannot be addressed without a comprehensive approach that considers environmental sustainability as a primary objective. The Town, with its vast natural landscapes and resources, has the potential to emerge as a leader in planning for the natural environment through implementing specific policies and providing the community the resources to enable stewardship and a sense of ownership in caring for the environment of the future. Some of the themes discussed further in this Discussion Paper will be:

- Environmental Sustainability, and opportunities for the Town to implement sustainable design elements and green infrastructure related to new development.
- Climate Change and Air Quality, to ensure the Town integrates considerations related to adaptation and mitigation.
- Integrating Agriculture and Economic Development, as a notable opportunity for the Town to implement policies to further support the use of rural and agricultural lands
- Preserving Water, to recognize the importance of source water protection plans and also to reduce the potential for hazardous impacts to water quality and water systems.
- Accessible Nature, as an important indicator to the quality of life a community can provide.
- Promoting Health and Wellbeing, to continue to prioritize physical and mental health through various forms of activities in public outdoor spaces.
- Environmental Stewardship, as an important element to protecting natural heritage through the ability to promote a more environmentally aware and involved community.



**Figure 4: Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Landscape Farming**

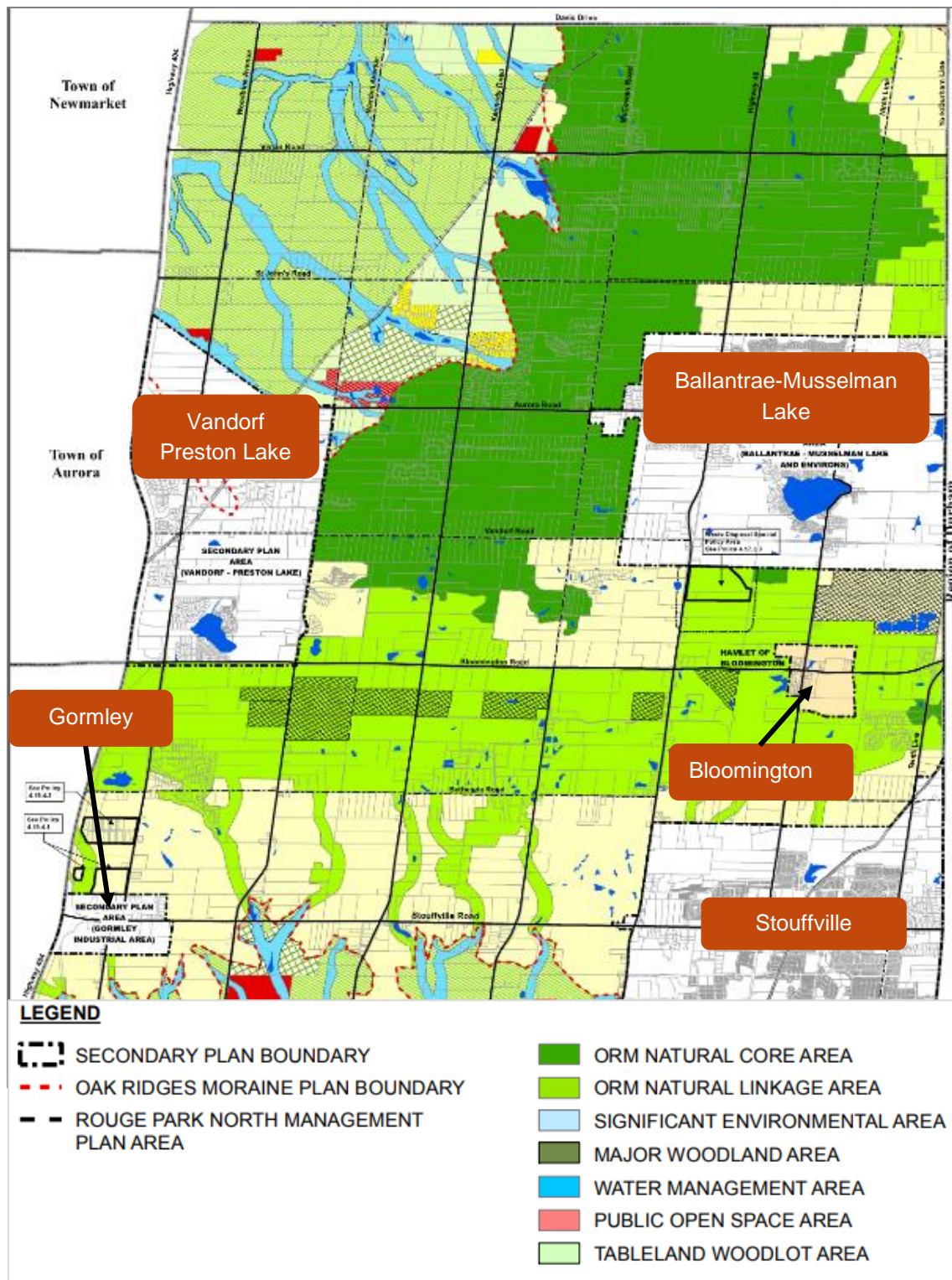


Figure 5: Greenlands System, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville



### 3 PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

Official Plans are guided and developed under a framework of overarching policies and plans established by the Province of Ontario. In cases where there is an upper-tier municipality, such as York Region, Provincial policy is implemented at the regional-level first, through the York Region Official Plan, and then implemented locally through the lower-tier Official Plans, like the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Official Plan.

Ensuring that the Town's new Official Plan will conform with provincial and regional Plans will be an ongoing task, undertaken throughout the Official Plan Review (OPR). The Planning for the Natural Environment Discussion Paper has been prepared in having consideration to the Provincial and regional policy framework set out within this section.

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#### 3.1 Planning Act

The *Planning Act* has been established in order to promote a land use planning system led by Provincial policy to be implemented by local municipalities through processes and decisions that are transparent and accessible in seeking to promote sustainable economic development supported by a healthy natural environment. A component to achieving the intent of the *Planning Act* is through establishing provincial interests that are to be integrated by municipal planning decisions. Provincial interests related to the natural environment include the following:

- Protection of ecological systems, including natural areas, features and functions;
- Protection of the agricultural resources of the Province;
- The orderly development of safe and healthy communities;
- The protection of public health and safety;
- The promotion of development that is designed to be sustainable, to support public transit and to be oriented to pedestrians;
- The minimization of waste
- Conservation and management of natural resources and the mineral resource base;
- Efficient use and conservation of energy and water; and,
- Mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation to a changing climate.

In addition, the *Planning Act* directs municipalities to consider areas of natural and scientific interests, including wetlands, ravines, valleys, woodlands, and wildlife habitats, to ensure that new development does not negatively impact these sensitive natural environments. *The Planning Act* also allows municipalities the opportunity when considering a draft plan of subdivision to have regard to conservation of natural resources and ensure that the necessary precautions and measures are examined to avoid negative impacts on the environment. These considerations recognize the need for local policy implementation to assess environmental impacts of planning decisions and opportunities for remediation, rehabilitation and integration of the natural environment.



### 3.2 Provincial Policy Statement, 2020

The current Provincial Policy Statement (PPS, 2020), effective May 2020, replaced the PPS, 2020 issued April 2014. The PPS, 2020 is issued under the authority of Section 3 of the *Planning Act* and provides direction on matters of provincial interest related to land use planning and development. It sets out policies concerning the creation of healthy communities, wise use and management of resources, and protection of public health and safety.

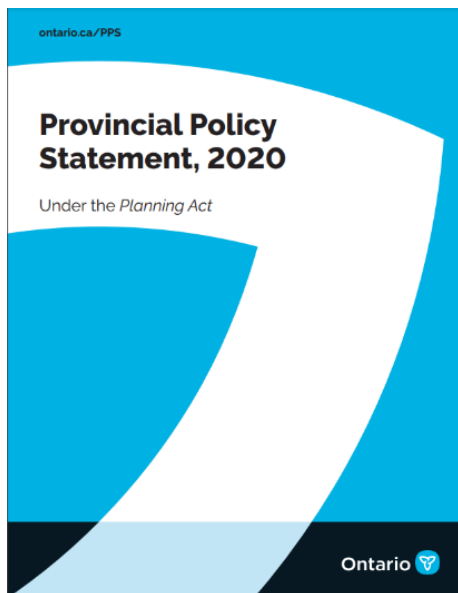


Figure 2: Cover Page, PPS, 2020

Recognizing Ontario's diversity of urban and rural communities, the PPS, 2020 provides for appropriate development while protecting resources of provincial interest, public health and safety, and the quality of the natural and built environment. The PPS, 2020, in conjunction with other Provincial plans, provides municipalities a framework for long-term planning that balances economic growth with a healthy and sustainable environment. This notable provincial objective of ensuring the wise use of and management of resources includes protecting and enhancing the Province's agricultural resources. As the PPS, 2020 notes that prime agricultural areas must be protected for long-term use for agriculture, planning authorities are encouraged to use an agricultural system approach to maintain and enhance the geographic continuity of the agricultural land base and the functional and economic connections to the agri-food network. A critical aspect to this is ensuring that agriculture-related uses and on-farm diversified uses are compatible with, and do not hinder, surrounding agricultural operations. In return, it is intended that protecting agricultural lands and the natural environment will ensure its resources are managed in a manner that does not impede on the essential ecological process of biodiversity that provides for the production of food and the continued growth of wildlife species.

The PPS, 2020 indicates that the natural environment is key to healthy, active and safe communities. Adequate and accessible opportunities to natural settings is distinguished as an indicator to quality of life in a given community given the ability of the natural environment to foster



public interaction, shape the public realm and connect communities. This includes ensuring the protection of natural features for the long-term through enhancing the diversity and connectivity of natural features through restoring, improving and recognizing linkages between and among natural heritage features and areas, surface water features and ground water features. For local municipalities, the PPS,2020 highlights the positive outcomes that can result from planning for the natural environment through recognizing its role in diminishing socio-economic barriers to interacting with nature and the vast social, economic and environmental successes it can generate through integrating parklands, public spaces, trails and water-based resources into the community fabric.

The Provincial Policy Statement, 2020 defines a natural heritage system as:

*“...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.”*

In addition, the PPS, 2020 establishes natural heritage directives to protect the quality and quantity of water. Planning authorities are required to minimize negative impacts to the watershed through cross-jurisdictional collaboration in order to prepare for the impacts of climate change, maintain linkages among water features and implement the necessary restrictions on development and site alteration. This signifies the intent of promoting natural heritage as a way to ensure that the environment can sustain local municipal water supplies and improve or restore vulnerable surface and ground water and its related functions.

The PPS, 2020 also specifies areas where development and site alteration are prohibited and areas where negative impacts must be avoided or mitigated. These areas include:

- Provincially Significant Wetlands (PSWs)
- Significant Woodlands
- Significant Valleylands
- Significant Wildlife Habitat
- Significant Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest
- Fish Habitat

In addition, the PPS, 2020 notes the importance of avoiding natural and human-made hazards to ensure long-term vitality of the natural environment. The PPS, 2020 stipulates that development will generally be directed, in accordance with guidance developed by the Province, to areas outside of hazardous lands adjacent large inland lakes which are impacted by flooding hazards, erosion hazards and/or dynamic beach hazards. In addition, planning authorities must prepare



for the impacts of a changing climate that may increase the risk associated with natural hazards. The PPS, 2020 stipulates that development and site alteration is not permitted unless the ecological function of the adjacent lands is evaluated and it can be demonstrated that there will be no negative impacts. Sites with contaminants in land or water must be assessed and remediated as necessary prior to any activity on the site associated with the proposed use such that there will be no adverse effects. The Natural Heritage Reference Manual (discussed later), provides guidance on identifying adjacent lands and processes for studying potential impacts on natural heritage features.

Lastly, the PPS, 2020 speaks to both individual features (e.g., PSWs, significant woodlands etc.) and the importance of connections, linkages and systems.

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### 3.3 A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for The Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2019

The Greater Golden Horseshoe encompasses Ontario's most significant ecological and hydrologic natural environments and scenic landscapes that support biodiversity, provide drinking water for the region's inhabitants, sustain its many resource-based industries and help moderate the impacts of a changing climate. In addition, this area of the Province has some of Canada's most important and productive farmland. Recognizing the significance of these invaluable natural resources, A Place to Grow: Growth Plan for The Greater Golden Horseshoe, 2019 (the Growth Plan) establishes a vision where the Greater Golden Horseshoe can be characterized by a healthy natural environment with clean air, land, and water as it continues to grow and develop. The policies of the Growth Plan are guided by the following principles as it relates to the natural environment:

- Protect and enhance natural heritage, hydrologic, and landform systems, features, and functions.
- Support and enhance the long-term viability and productivity of agriculture by protecting prime agricultural areas and the agri-food network.
- Integrate climate change considerations into planning and managing growth such as planning for more resilient communities and infrastructure – that are adaptive to the impacts of a changing climate – and moving towards environmentally sustainable communities by incorporating approaches to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

As mentioned earlier, the Growth Plan establishes a vision where the Greater Golden Horseshoe can be characterized by a healthy natural environment with clean air, land, and water as it continues to grow and develop the objectives promoted through the Growth Plan support the role of municipalities in providing leadership and innovation in developing a culture of conservation and sustainability. The Growth Plan also emphasizes the importance of protecting what is valuable now in order to promote long-term vitality. This includes, but is not limited to, policy directives related to the natural heritage system, agricultural system, water resource system and public open spaces. The Growth Plan's requirements for no negative impacts to environmental resources ensures that ecosystem services can continue their essential functions while providing resiliency to growing communities.



The Growth Plan also asserts the understanding that climate change and greenhouse emissions can put forth unprecedented challenges to a thriving natural environment which can endanger natural processes and our collective quality of life. This signifies the importance for municipalities to consider strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve resilience from unexpected conditions through establishing municipal interim and long-term greenhouse gas emission reduction targets. These targets should support provincial targets and reflect consideration of the goal of low-carbon communities, along with opportunities to monitor and report on progress made towards the achievement of these targets.



**Figure 7: Growth Plan Cover Page and Definitions Section**

To support a comprehensive, integrated, and long-term approach to planning for the protection of the region's natural heritage and biodiversity, a Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan has been mapped by the Province. Municipalities must incorporate the Natural Heritage System for the Growth Plan as an overlay in official plans, and must apply appropriate policies to maintain, restore, or enhance the diversity and connectivity of the system and the long-term ecological or hydrologic functions.

In addition, an Agricultural System for the Greater Golden Horseshoe has been identified by the Province. Prime agricultural areas, including specialty crop areas, will be designated in accordance with mapping identified by the Province and these areas will be protected for long-term use for agriculture. Protection of these areas is achieved through ensuring compatible land uses and promoting the geographic continuity of the agricultural land base and the functional and economic connections to the agri-food network. This signifies that municipalities are encouraged to implement regional agri-food strategies and other approaches to sustain and enhance the Agricultural System and the long-term economic prosperity and viability of the agri-food sector.



### 3.4 Greenbelt Plan, 2017

The Greenbelt Plan identifies where urbanization should not occur in order to provide permanent protection to the agricultural land base and its associated ecological and hydrological features, areas and functions spanning over 800,000 hectares of land. While providing agricultural and environmental protection, the Greenbelt also contains important natural resources and supports a wide range of economic and social activities associated with rural communities, agriculture, tourism, recreation and resource uses.

The Greenbelt Plan details goals associated with Protected Countryside Lands, which can be found within the Town, to further support mitigating negative impacts to these lands. This includes directives regarding the protection of agricultural vitality, supporting the environment, improving infrastructure and natural resources and integration of climate change considerations. In return, this demonstrates that municipalities must consider sustainable agricultural practices and the long-term management of natural and water resources while reducing greenhouse emissions in an effort to increase the resiliency of the Greenbelt and surrounding settlement areas.

In addition, some lands under the Greenbelt Plan within the Town are designated as part of the Natural Heritage System. This specific designation protects areas of natural heritage, hydrologic and/or landform features, which are often functionally inter-related and which collectively provide essential ecosystem services, including water storage and filtration, cleaner air, habitat, support for pollinators, carbon storage and resilience to climate change. To ensure the resiliency of these lands, municipalities may permit a full range of existing and new agricultural, agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses and normal farm practices without jeopardizing the connectivity or integrity of the natural heritage features and resources. This includes abiding by set targets to minimize the presence of impervious surfaces and ensuring a percentage of a properties total developable area remain or be returned to natural self-sustaining vegetation.



**Figure 8: Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Barn**



The current Town Official Plan has not yet been updated to conform to and implement the Greenbelt Plan, 2017. The current Official Plan Review process will ensure conformity through implementation of the new Town Official Plan.

### 3.5 Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan, 2017

The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan is an ecologically based plan that provides land use and resource management direction for the 190,000 hectares of land and water. This landscape also encompasses approximately 80% of the Town. Strategically located north of and parallel to Lake Ontario, the Moraine divides the watersheds draining south into western Lake Ontario from those draining north into Georgian Bay, Lake Simcoe and the Trent River system. The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan has been established due to the importance of the natural resource and the ecological functions it produces critical to health of humans, plants and animal habitats. Objectives of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan related to the natural environment can be summarized as the following:

- Protecting, maintaining, improving and/or restoring the ecological and hydrological integrity of the Oak Ridges Moraine Area;
- Ensuring that the Oak Ridges Moraine Area is maintained as a continuous natural landform and environment for the benefit of present and future generations;
- Providing for other public recreational access to the Oak Ridges Moraine Area that is accessible to all including persons with disabilities; and,
- Providing for land and resource uses and development that are compatible with the other objectives of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan divides the area into land use designations to further specify the intended use and scope of resource management. The following land use designations apply to the Town:

- **Natural Core Areas:** Encompass a high concentration of key natural heritage features, key hydrologic features, ecological functions or landform conservation areas.
- **Natural Linkage Areas:** Form part of a central corridor system that support or have the potential to support movement of plants and animals among the Natural Core Areas, Natural Linkage Areas, river valleys and stream corridors.
- **Countryside Areas:** Accommodate rural land uses such as agriculture, recreation, residential development, Rural Settlements, mineral aggregate operations, parks and open space.
- **Settlement Areas:** Designated for development of an urban type permitting a range of residential, commercial, industrial and institutional uses.

The policy directives of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan are rooted in the importance of protecting and enhancing the environment and demonstrate the need for municipalities to consider the impacts of growth on natural heritage resources and functions. This includes aligning local municipal policies with the objectives and permitted uses of each land use designation within the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan to ensure that growth is supported by environmental



sustainability.



Figure 9: Entering the Oak Ridges Moraine

## 3.6 Other Relevant Provincial Legislation

### 3.6.1 Clean Water Act, 2006

A key deliverable required under the *Clean Water Act* is a source water protection plan, which is undertaken in order to protect existing and future drinking water sources in any given identified source protection area. This is assessed in every area where an activity is or would be a threat to drinking water in order to ensure the activity never becomes a threat, or ceases to be one. Section 40 of the *Clean Water Act* requires municipalities to bring their Official Plan into conformity with the relevant policies and map schedules of those Source Protection Plans (SPPs) that regulate their municipal drinking water systems.

SPPs are developed for a watershed area (as delineated in the *Act*) from a scientific and technical foundation to eliminate or reduce the risks posed by drinking water threats. Assessment Reports provide the technical background upon which SPPs are prepared. Assessment Reports describe the local watershed, assess the available water supplies, map vulnerable areas and identify drinking water threats in the vulnerable areas that pose a risk to municipal drinking water systems.

The development of Assessment Reports and SPPs is led by a Source Protection Committee formed for each Source Protection Region, in conjunction with the Municipality, Region, and Conservation Authorities. There are 24 Source Protection Regions and corresponding Source Protection Plans in effect across the Province. The following SPPs are applicable to Town

- South Georgian Bay Lake Simcoe; and,
- Credit Valley, Toronto and Region and Central Lake.



The current Town Official Plan has not yet been updated to conform to and implement the SPPs. The current Official Plan Review process will ensure conformity through implementation of the new Town Official Plan.

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### 3.6.2 Environmental Assessment Act, 1990

The *Environmental Assessment Act, 1990* ensures that governments and public bodies consider potential environmental effects before an infrastructure project begins. This five-phase process, often related to road, sewer and water projects, helps to understand the scope and severity of impact to plants, animals, traffic, residents and businesses in the community. Key principles that must be considered by municipalities, including the Town, can be summarized as the following:

- Communication throughout the process;
  - Consideration of many alternatives and their effects on the environment;
  - Evaluation of advantages and disadvantages of alternatives; and,
  - Clear documentation of all steps in the decision-making process.
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### 3.6.3 Species at Risk Legislation

The federal *Species at Risk Act, 2002* and the provincial *Endangered Species Act, 2007* designate Species at Risk as either Extirpated (EX), Endangered (END), Threatened (THR) or Special Concern (SC) depending on level of risk. Under Federal and/or Provincial legislation, species and their habitat are protected if classified as EX, END or THR. There is no legal protection for species ranked as SC, however their preservation and protection is generally encouraged to assist with preserving Ontario's biodiversity. Activities with potential for indirect or direct impacts to Species at Risk habitat, including activities associated with restoration/and or enhancement activities, should be reviewed by regulatory agencies and may require permits under the federal *Species at Risk Act, 2002* or the provincial *Endangered Species Act, 2007*.

The habitat protections offered under both the Provincial Policy Statement and species at risk legislation are similar and are complementary to each other.

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### 3.6.4 Fisheries Act, 1985

The focus of the *Fisheries Act* (amended August 28, 2019) is to protect all waters frequented by fish and any other areas upon which fish depend directly or indirectly to carry out their life processes. The types of areas that can directly or indirectly support life processes include, but are not limited to: spawning grounds and nursery, rearing, food supply and migration areas. The fish and fish habitat protection provisions of the *Fisheries Act* aim to avoid the death of fish, or the harmful alteration, disruption or destruction (HADD) of fish and fish habitat. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) have developed *Measures to Protect Fish and Habitat*, which when followed can avoid impacts to fish and fish habitat. DFO have also developed interim codes of practice for common works, undertakings and activities. These provide guidance on how to avoid and mitigate impacts to fish and fish habitat and comply with the *Fisheries Act* and *Species at Risk Act*.



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### 3.6.5 Natural Heritage Reference Manual

The Natural Heritage Reference Manual, prepared by the Province of Ontario, provides guidance for interpreting the Provincial Policy Statement policies on natural heritage. The document includes an appendix outlining a recommended approach to natural heritage system planning. Specifically, the Natural Heritage Reference Manual recommends that natural heritage systems should be identified using a comprehensive approach that evaluates the contribution of all land cover and habitats to the ecological function and biodiversity of landscapes and examines deficiencies that should be rectified to address diversity and connectivity. This comprehensive approach recognizes that individual natural areas and features have strong ecological ties to one another, as well as ecological interdependencies within the larger landscape. The comprehensive approach emphasizes the maintenance and enhancement of ecological functions (e.g., corridors, linkages) that sustain biodiversity rather than solely serving to protect individual features or patches of habitat. The Natural Heritage Reference Manual further provides a recommended approach for identifying adjacent lands to natural features, and the requirements for an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) – referred to as an Environmental Assessment in the Town Official Plan, that are intended to be implemented through official plan policies.

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### 3.6.6 Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas, 2016

The Guidelines on Permitted Uses in Ontario’s Prime Agricultural Areas, issued under the previous PPS, 2014, are intended to help municipalities, decisionmakers, farmers and others interpret the policies in the PPS on the uses that are permitted in prime agricultural areas. Given the wide differences in municipal approaches to permitted uses, these guidelines aim to increase the consistency across the Province. This allows municipalities to develop their own criteria for permitted uses in municipal planning documents as long as they achieve the same objectives as the Provincial guidelines. This document provides guidance on agricultural, agriculture-related and on-farm diversified uses, the removal of land for new and expanding settlement areas and opportunities for mitigation of impacts from new or expanding non-agricultural uses.



**Figure 10: Food Production in the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville**



### 3.6.7 Minimum Distance Separation Formulae

The Minimum Distance Separation (MDS) Formulae are land use planning tools that determine setback distances between livestock barns, manure storages or anaerobic digesters and surrounding land uses. The objective of MDS is to minimize land use conflicts and nuisance complaints related to odour. MDS does not account for other nuisances such as noise or dust. MDS is made up of two separate, but related, formulae that act reciprocally to site both new development and new or expanding livestock facilities:

- **MDS I** – provides the minimum distance separation between proposed new development and any existing livestock barns, manure storages and/or anaerobic digesters; and,
- **MDS II** – provides the minimum distance separation between proposed new, expanding or remodeled livestock barns, manure storages and/or anaerobic digesters and existing or approved development.

The MDS Formulae are based on five factors:

- The type of livestock housed;
- The potential number of livestock housed (based on barn capacity or lot size);
- The percentage increase in the size of the operation;
- The type of manure system and storage; and,
- The type of encroaching land use.

The calculated setback distances will vary according to these five factors, and will result in unique distances for different types of operations in different circumstances and locations. References to MDS are to be included in municipal planning documents such as zoning by-laws and official plans. Before a land use planning approval can be given, or a building permit can be issued, conformity to the MDS Document must be demonstrated.



**Figure 11: Livestock Barn in the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville**



### 3.7 Role of Conservation Authorities

Conservation Authorities are public sector organizations that develop and implement programs and services that further the conservation, restoration, development and management of natural resources in watersheds in Ontario. Conservation Authorities are governed under the *Conservation Authorities Act*, which is administered by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR). Conservation Authorities provide advice to municipalities on natural hazard management and help to regulate development and other activities in areas affected by water-based natural hazards through a permit process. Under the Act, Conservation Authorities are granted permitting authority within their regulated area to ensure that development does not have an adverse effect on natural features and will not be at risk from natural hazards.

Natural hazard lands located within the Town fall under the jurisdiction of two Conservation Authorities, which include:

- Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority
- Toronto and Region Conservation Authority

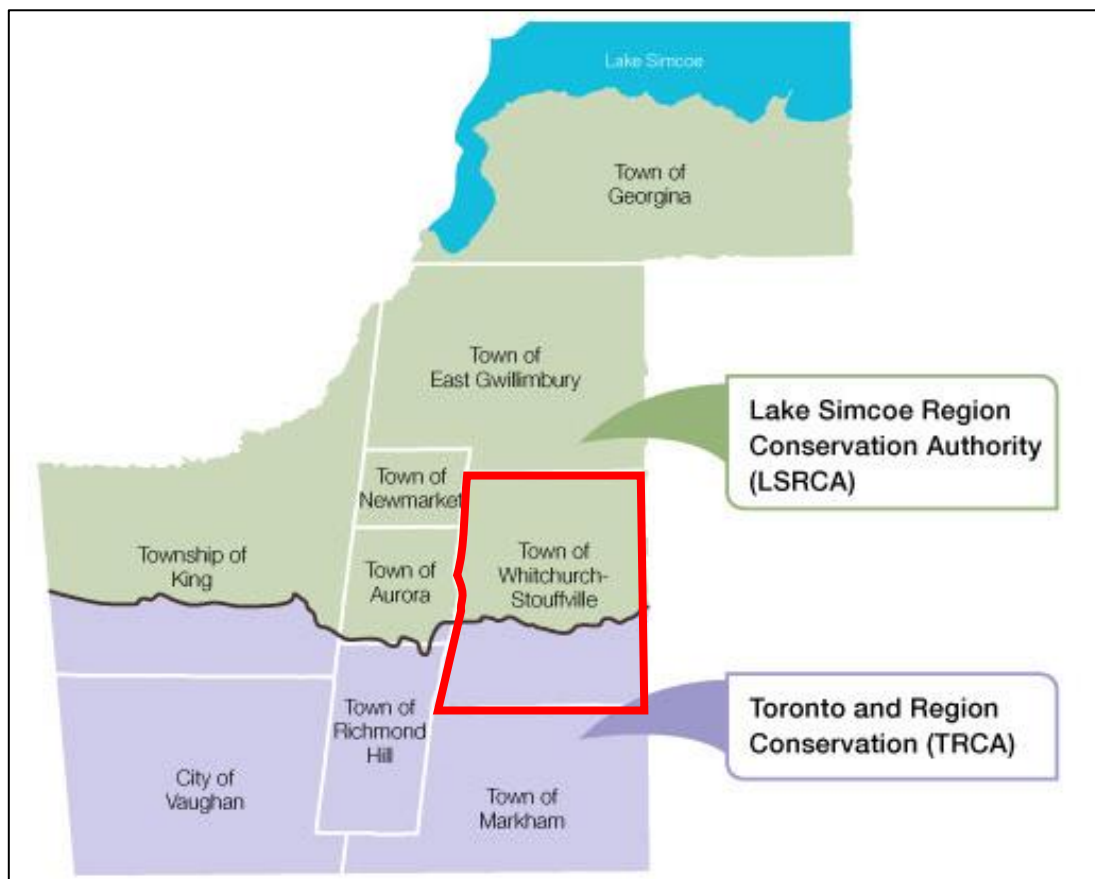


Figure 12: Conservation Area Boundary Map



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## 3.8 York Region Policies and Strategies

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### 3.8.1 Regional Official Plan

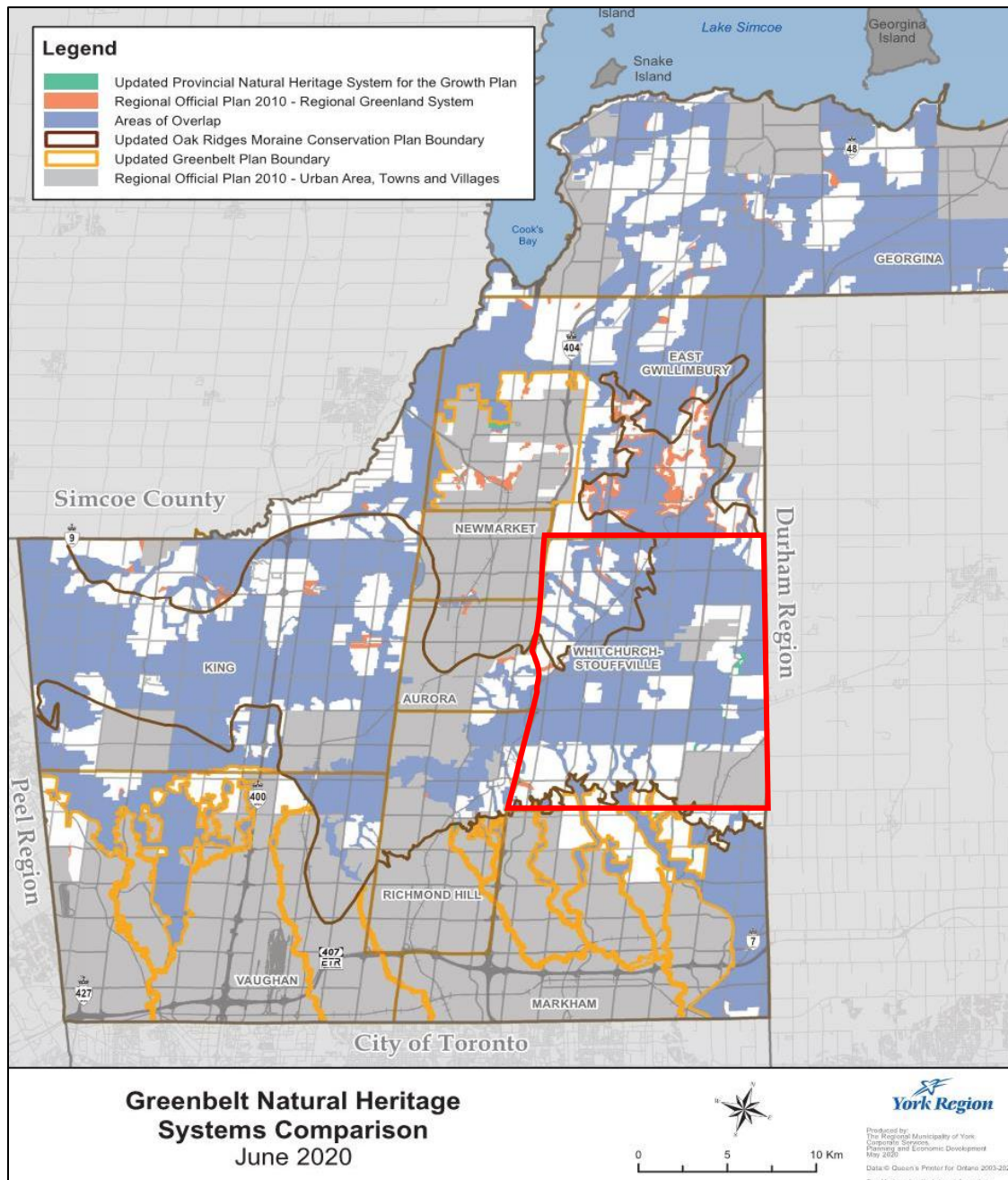
The York Region Official Plan was approved in 2010 and establishes upper-tier policy direction for the entire Region. Local municipal official plans are required to conform with this Regional Official Plan. The Official Plan promotes a sustainable natural environment in recognition that the Region's greenlands systems provide habitats for a variety of species and play an important role in the Region's ecology and native biodiversity. In addition, prioritizing environmental protection mitigates the impacts of climate change, ensures improved air quality and water resource management. The Official Plan asserts the natural environment as being a key indicator to the economic vitality of York Region and the goal of ensuring the development of healthy communities.

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### 3.8.2 Ongoing Municipal Comprehensive Review (MCR)

In 2018, York Region initiated a work program to undertake a Municipal Comprehensive Review in order to implement the policies updates of Provincial policies and plans, including the *Growth Plan* in 2017, and to ensure proper guidance is provided to directing the Region's population and employment growth. The Growth Plan introduced Provincial Natural Heritage System mapping to be incorporated into Official Plans. The Region is reviewing this mapping alongside the Regional Greenlands System to assess mapping and policy requirements and is expected to release agriculture and natural heritage mapping for review in Winter 2020/21. The Regional Greenlands System is a continuous land base that protects a system of natural features including wetlands, woodlands, lakes and streams that function collectively to provide essential ecosystem services including water storage and filtration, habitat and resilience to climate change.

A province-wide agricultural system has been introduced through updates to key provincial plans. These systems are implemented by York Region through the Official Plan. The province also released updated agricultural land base mapping that differs from the current Regional mapping. Additional areas in the Region's Rural areas were proposed as Agriculture (prime agriculture) in the provincial mapping. Through the MCR the Region can refine this mapping. Forty-one refinement study areas Region-wide, and eleven within the Town, identify where provincial proposed agricultural areas overlap with areas currently identified in the Official Plan as rural area. In addition, the Province introduced an agricultural system to support the protection of farmland and to promote economic development of the agriculture and agri-food sector. Part of this system includes the land base consisting of specialty crop areas, prime agriculture lands, and rural lands where active agriculture and related uses are ongoing. It aims to link these with agricultural areas to support the agri-food network.



**Figure 13: Greenbelt Natural Heritage Systems Comparison Map, Region of York**

York Region is required to incorporate updated provincial mapping into the Official Plan and include appropriate policies to maintain, restore, or enhance the diversity and connectivity of the system. In addition, the Regional Official Plan update will refine existing Regional Greenlands System and feature mapping (including wetlands and woodlands) where more recent information is available.



Key policy and mapping changes under consideration include:

- Implement the Provincial Natural Heritage System mapping;
- Update current mapping with new and updated data and information (i.e. individual features such as provincially significant wetlands, and areas of natural and scientific interest);
- Review of current policy framework for the provincial Natural Heritage System (as per the Growth Plan, 2019);
- Update current definitions and policy language with respect to the water resource systems; and,
- Ensure watershed policies reflect new provincial requirements.

It is anticipated that the Region's Municipal Comprehensive Review and Official Plan update will be adopted by Regional Council in 2021. The Town's Official Plan is required to be updated within one year of the approval of the Region's Official Plan to ensure consistency of policy directives.

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### **3.8.3 Sustainability Strategy, 2007**

York Region introduced a Sustainability Strategy to provide a long-term framework for making smarter municipal decisions about growth management and all municipal responsibilities that better integrate the economy, environment and community. This strategic initiative allows the Region to translate the concept of sustainability into practical action in order to practice prevention and adaptation so that local communities become more resilient to long-term social, economic and climate change impacts. A sustainable natural environment is a key focus of this Strategy given the ability to promote outcomes that shape lifestyle, community design, infrastructure and financial decisions. This includes initiatives to incorporate sustainable farming techniques, adopt principles for the creation of energy efficient communities and to encourage awareness on the implications of sustainability on the health and wellbeing of the environment, residents and businesses.

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### **3.8.4 Greening Strategy, 2012**

Updated in 2012, the York Region Greening Strategy provides a context for Regional decision-making that supports a sustainable natural environment through forming partnerships to drive policies into action related to greenlands and natural heritage features. This includes providing a framework for initiatives to restore habitat, increase forest cover, secure greenlands and their linkages, and promote and protect the natural environment. The Strategy also seeks to enhance and rehabilitate the natural environment on both public and private lands recognizing that healthy and sustainable natural environments support healthy and sustainable communities. In addition, the Strategy aims to educate residents about the value of green infrastructure, provide opportunities to discover connections with nature and inspire action.



**Figure 14: Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Landscape**

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### **3.8.5 Forest Management Plan, 2019**

The 20-Year Forest Management Plan guides management and forest use activities in the York Regional Forest including tree planting, sustainable harvesting and tending. This will ensure that environmental and health benefits of the York Regional Forest are optimized for residents over the long term, and that assets are managed sustainably over their life cycle. The Forest Management Plan will also inform the development of tree canopy and greenspace policies to ensure that the Official Plan supports achieving the goals and objectives related to greenspace, parkland, and tree canopy coverage.

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### **3.8.6 York Region Edge Planning Background Report, 2018**

The York Region Edge Planning Background Report was prepared to identify the importance of agricultural resources and farmland as a means of recognizing additional benefits of farmland for providing stormwater storage and runoff control, protection against erosion, water infiltration, carbon sequestering, pollination and habitat. The Background Report recognizes the importance and need to protect agricultural lands from urban development and identifies various planning tools and implementation mechanisms that should be considered to reduce adverse impacts of urban development on adjacent agricultural uses along the agricultural-urban boundary.

There is an opportunity for the Town OPR to consider edge planning policies, which could be designed to ensure agricultural land is protected by mitigating impacts (to both the agricultural and urban land users).



### 3.9 Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Official Plan

The current Town Official Plan envisions a safe and healthy community that is environmentally aware through seeking to protect the resources of rural and agricultural areas by focusing development in designated settlement areas. A notable principle of the Official Plan is ensuring that any change in the Town should be undertaken in a manner which will preserve and enhance the integrity of the natural environment. This principle is intended to ensure that environmental sustainability is considered as a major factor in the future planning of the municipality, and particularly in the assessment of any proposed changes in the community. This refers to the preservation and enhancement of the natural environment including surface and groundwater systems, natural habitats (i.e. aquatic, wetland and terrestrial), landforms (including the Oak Ridges Moraine), natural area corridors and the establishment of linkages between natural features.

Notable policy areas of the Town Official Plan related to the natural environment include the following:

- **Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan:** The Official Plan recognizes parts of the Town applicable to the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan through applying land designations to ensure compatibility and protection of the Moraine. The purpose of designating these area's is to maintain, and where possible improve or restore, the ecological integrity of the Moraine Area. In addition, this allows the Town to establish permitted uses and land use policies on these lands to ensure protection of lands with a high concentration of key natural heritage features, hydrologically sensitive features or landform conservation areas.
- **Greenlands System:** The Official Plan establishes policies regarding the need for a Greenlands System for the area of the Town located outside the Oak Ridges Moraine. The Greenlands System includes significant natural features which have an important environmental function. This includes a trails system to link key features of the Greenlands System, together with the Town's Park System and the Trans-Canada, Oak Ridges Moraine and the Rouge Park Trail Systems in a manner compatible with the protection of the lands in the Greenlands System. In addition, the Town encourages natural corridor linkages for the enhancement and restoration of land around natural heritage features that will assist in rehabilitating areas that may have degraded over time.
- **Water Resource and Source Water Protection:** Significant groundwater resource areas within the Town, particularly those lands which are designated "Water Management Area", have been identified as being potentially sensitive to development because of their recharge and discharge functions. Groundwater management is to be addressed through Functional Servicing Studies to understand the effects of temporary dewatering, recharge of aquifer systems (quality and quantity) and baseflow to streams. In addition, the Official Plan details the need for implementing stormwater management best practices to further protect water resources. The Town recognizes the need to collaborate with the Region of York and the Conservation Authorities to complete and implement watershed plans, including water budgets and water conservation plans. This includes prohibiting all development and site alteration in a subwatershed on the Oak Ridges Moraine, except in the Communities of Stouffville and Ballantrae, if it would cause the total percentage of subwatershed area on the



Moraine having impervious surfaces to exceed 10 percent, or any lower percentage specified in an approved watershed or subwatershed plan.

- **Tree Conservation:** It is the objective of the Town to maintain and enhance existing woodlands, woodlots, hedgerows and trees wherever possible, and to encourage the planting of new woodlots and trees in all areas of the Town, including the Greenlands System.
- **Significant Habitat of Endangered Species and Threatened Species, Fish Habitat and Wildlife:** The Official Plan specifies that regardless of land use designation, no development or site alteration can be permitted in a significant habitat of endangered or threatened species. This includes fish habitat unless in accordance with provincial or federal requirements.

The Official Plan also details an Environmental Conservation Strategy that establishes policies which recognize the Town's location in the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Rouge Park North Management Plan Study Area. The Strategy provides policies with respect to environmental control measures, floodplain areas, and the development of a resource management plan as a basis for community action with respect to environment conservation and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan. The Town Official Plan recognizes private and public stewardship to promote environmental protection and awareness in order to promote its importance to the community and its habitats.



**Figure 15: Bruce's Mill Conservation Area**

### 3.9.1 Community of Stouffville Sustainable Development Guidelines, 2012

The Sustainable Development Guidelines are used by the Town as a tool for assessing the sustainable features of development applications. The Guidelines have been prepared in the form of a checklist that itemizes the various types of project design features that will be considered in the evaluation process. These are organized under three basic categories:



- Energy and Water (energy efficient design, water and waste water reduction)
- Community Design (efficient development and infrastructure design, healthy community design, employment generation/economic enhancement and open space enhancement); and,
- Buildings (enhanced design features, development standards).

Minimum standards must be achieved in order to receive servicing allocation, while the maximum sustainability standards are encouraged, and where proposed, will allow the development to be considered for height and density bonuses, or other considerations identified by the Town. The Town recognizes that the specific requirements may not be applicable to all applications. Therefore, the level of compliance will be based only on the percentage of applicable points achieved. In addition, some applicants may wish to phase the use of the checklist and the Town will work with an applicant to consider such an approach.



**Figure 16: Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Flower Bed**



## 4 KEY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Natural areas are not only unique, but also irreplaceable, the Town has identified the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment as one of the pillars of their OPR process. The key issues and opportunities for the Town's Natural Environment discussed in this Paper are shown in Figure 8 below. There however, underlying topics that knit-together the various themes explored under the Natural Environment umbrella such as Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan Conformity requirements, the protection of prime agricultural land, and the importance of maintaining and enhancing a Natural Heritage System.

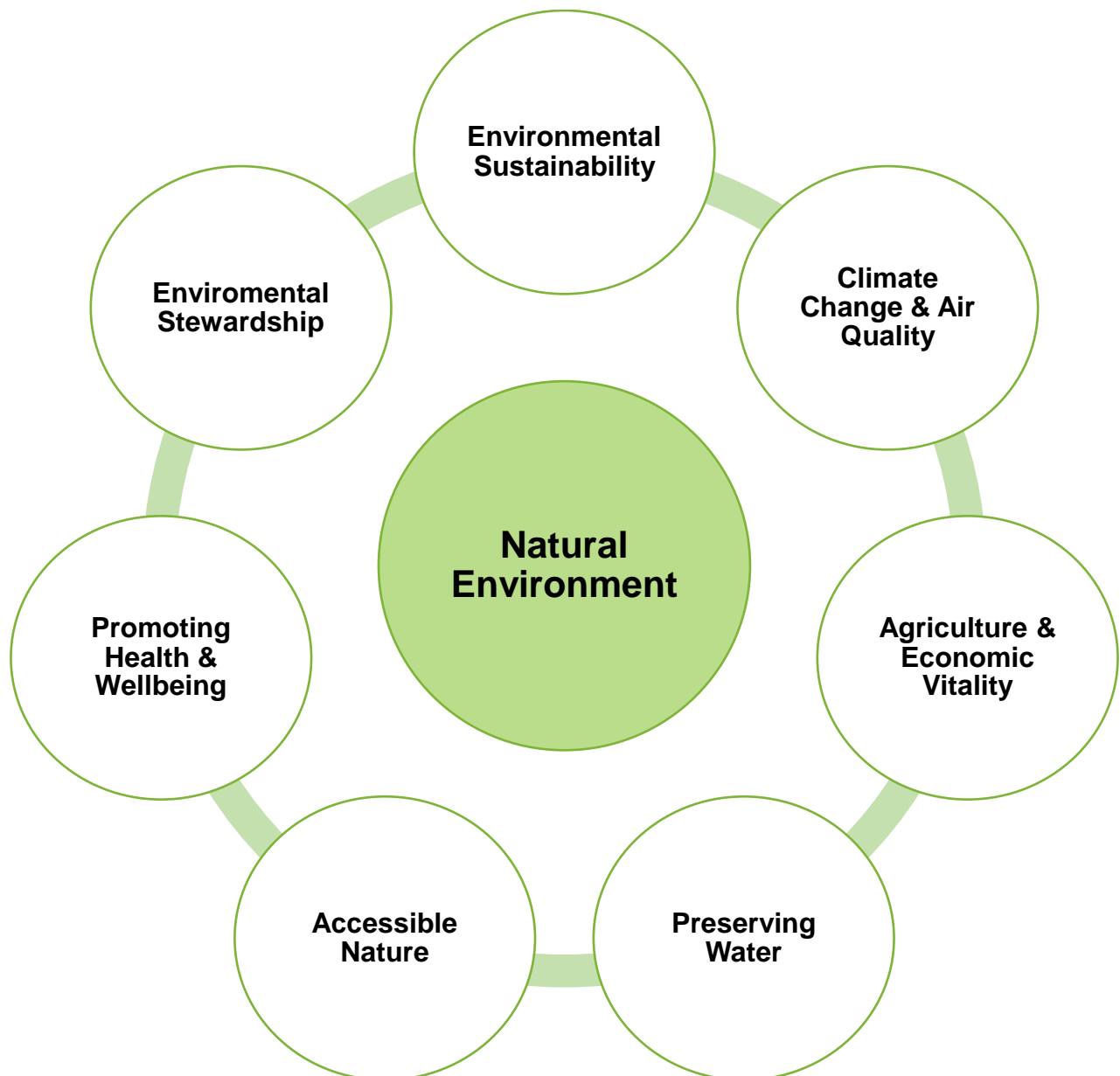


Figure 17: Planning for the Natural Environment Discussion Paper Themes



## 4.1 Environmental Sustainability

The *Planning Act* places a considerable emphasis on the implementation of sustainable design elements as it relates to developments and specific design projects. This is further supported by the PPS, 2020 vision of sustainable and resilient communities for people of all ages founded on a clean and healthy environment. The PPS, 2020 implements this through ensuring that resources are managed in a sustainable manner to conserve biodiversity, protect essential ecological processes and provide for the production of food and fibre. Efficient land use and development patterns is a key implementation tool to supporting sustainability by promoting strong, liveable, healthy and resilient communities that protect the environment, public health and economic growth.



**Figure 18: Recreational Activities in the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville**

The Growth Plan, together with the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan, consistently recognize that the ongoing availability of natural resources are essential for the sustainability of all communities. The Town Official Plan, based on the overarching provincial plans and policies, intends to ensure that environmental sustainability is considered as a major factor in the future planning of the municipality and particularly in the assessment of any proposed changes in the community. To implement this direction, and as part of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan conformity exercise, the Town's Environment Conservation Strategy establishes policies which recognize the Town's location in the Oak Ridges Moraine and the Rouge Park North Management Plan Study Area, as well as establishing a Greenlands System for the community in accordance with the recommendations of the Town's Natural Features and Greenlands Study and the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan.

Environmental sustainability has been identified as an interest during the Official Plan Review given the opportunities for the Town to implement further policies for the preservation and



enhancement of the natural environment including surface and groundwater systems, natural habitats (i.e. aquatic, wetland and terrestrial), landforms (including the Oak Ridges Moraine), natural area corridors and the establishment of linkages between natural features. In addition, it will allow for the Town to consider the essential and irreplaceable services of ecological functions to be further integrated into the design of public and private spaces to ensure that new and existing buildings are environmentally friendly and sustainable for long-term use. This will not only allow the Town to preserve its unique rural character, but also ensure that urbanizing areas provide residents access to the natural environment in order to promote their physical, mental and social wellbeing.

Jurisdictions throughout Ontario have recognized the invaluable benefits of promoting environmental sustainability by incorporating assertive Official Plan polices, and specific strategic plans, to achieve this objective. The City of Mississauga Strategic Plan for example, identifies “Living Green” as part of one of the five strategic vision pillars for the City which involves implementing measures that are sensitive to, and complement, the natural environment. This is in recognition that as the City continues to grow, it is imperative this does not compromise the natural environment and the ability to promote sustainable approaches to development. The City Strategic Plan outlines the natural environment as fundamentally critical to human and economic vitality and the overall wellbeing of society given the necessities of life it provides, including clean water, air and land. The *Living Green Master Plan* as implemented by the City serves to identify environmental actions to instill a corporate culture where City staff and elected officials consider the environmental impact of their decisions and to ensure residents, community groups and businesses have the information they need to “live green” in their homes and community. This Plan is centred on specific actions which foster innovation and behavioural change. As a corporation, the City set an example through its actions to demonstrate best practices in sustainability to raise interest and awareness that will help advance change and encourage others to change their behaviour and live green.



**Figure 19: Port Credit Waterfront, City of Mississauga**



### 4.1.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions

The preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions listed below are further complemented and expanded in the Environmental Sustainability Section of the Planning for Growth Discussion Paper. Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the Official Plan Review include the following:

#### Policy Recommendations:

- Ensure Official Plan conformity with the updated Greenbelt Plan, 2017;
- Ensure Official Plan conformity with the updated South Georgian Bay Lake Simcoe Source Protection Plan, 2019;
- Ensure Official Plan conformity with the updated Credit Valley, Toronto and Region and Central Lake Source Protection Plan, 2019;
- Encourage the application of sustainable building design and construction practices that reduce stormwater flows, the use of water, waste and use renewable energy systems and energy efficient technologies;
- Incorporate the use of innovative green spaces such as green roofs and designs that enhance urban ecology;
- Develop a comprehensive green development standards strategy, with performance incentives to reduce the environmental impact of new developments in the Town;
- Provide sustainable growing environments for trees by allocating adequate soil volumes and landscaped area through development, redevelopment, site alteration and infrastructure;
- Continue to introduce natural areas of varying sizes to help sustain the environment by cleaning the air, recharging groundwater, cleaning watercourses and limiting damage that might arise from flooding and soil erosion;
- Encourage low impact development methods for stormwater management including stormwater attenuation and re-use and use of green infrastructure; and,
- Include policies to maintain and enhance pollinator habitat in particular to reduce traditional turf and landscape maintenance while still providing interactive open space.

#### Strategic Directions

- Promote low impact development practices and technologies on municipal property and as part of Town operations to deal with problems related to urban stormwater runoff including erosion, sedimentation and pollution;
- Consider implementation of a tree by-law applicable to private and public property required for all construction related applications when protected trees are in proximity of the proposed work;
- Consider tree canopy targets for sustaining and enhancing forest assets complemented by implementing applicable Town programs and management activities;
- Consider forest management planning as a primary tool to ensure that the Town's publicly owned forests/naturalized areas remain healthy and vibrant and are managed sustainably. This can include partnering with the Region and adjacent municipalities where forests/naturalized cross jurisdictional boundaries;



- Partner with community organizations to improve boulevards and sidewalks to incorporate sustainable design elements, which may include one or more of the following: trees, shrubs, hedges, plantings or other ground cover, permeable paving materials, street furniture, curb ramps, waste and recycling. This includes implementing a boulevard beautification and maintenance program, with a focus on native species plantings to beautify local streets in an environmentally responsible way;
- Consider updates to the Sustainability Development Guidelines to harmonize language or reference specific objectives of the new Official Plan; and,
- Consider undertaking a Sustainability and Healthy Community Policy Study that could go beyond the Sustainable Development Guidelines and leverage the Regions work in public health and the development of healthy communities to create an integrated policy framework/strategy that addresses challenges with environmental and public health implications. This Study, in concert with the Sustainable Development Guidelines, could be used to provide direction and to evaluate secondary plans, block plans, and draft plans of subdivision and site plan applications to ensure that a high level of urban design and the intended level of sustainability is achieved.

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## 4.2 Climate Change and Air Quality

The *Planning Act* states that an Official Plan should contain policies that identify goals, objectives and actions to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and to provide for adaptation to a changing climate, including through increasing resiliency. The PPS, 2020 further distinguishes communities that are resilient to climate change will also be strong, liveable and healthy communities that promote and enhance human health and social wellbeing, and are economically and environmentally sound.

The Growth Plan further builds on these directives through ensuring protection of agricultural and natural areas and support climate change mitigation and adaptation as Ontario moves towards the goal of environmentally sustainable communities. This includes supporting the role of municipal policy in providing leadership and innovation in developing a culture of conservation and addressing climate change. This is consistent with the objectives of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan in recognizing the ability of the Moraine and agricultural/rural lands in protecting and restoring natural areas and features that sequester carbon and provide ecological functions to help reduce the impacts of climate change.

Climate change has been identified as an important issue to be addressed as part of the Official Plan Review in order to ensure the Town integrates climate change considerations into planning and managing growth, including incorporating techniques to reduce greenhouse gas emissions as part of all municipal decisions. This is a topic not addressed in the current Official and requires careful consideration in the context of the Town to ensure conformity with updated provincial plans and policies, along with the aspirations of the local community to mitigate the negative effects of climate change on the natural environment. Resilience to the ongoing challenges of climate change will allow the Town to proactively protect essential ecosystem services, including water storage and filtration, clean air, habitat, support for pollinators and carbon storage. In addition,



this will provide for the continuation of a healthier community through protecting essential food, water and infrastructure sources.

Planning authorities throughout Ontario have recognized the need to counter climate change through actionable policies and targets to achieve long-term resiliency. The City of Markham Municipal Energy Plan for example, is a comprehensive long-term energy plan that will improve energy efficiency, and reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions in established and new community areas. The Plan's primary intent is to set a roadmap for targeting net zero emissions by 2050 to address climate change mitigation and adaptation in a comprehensive manner. This is defined as reduced energy needs through efficiency gains and conservation. Annual energy needs for vehicles, thermal, and electricity are met by sustainable and non-fossil fuel sources, carbon offsets and/or carbon sequestration resulting in an annual net zero balance of greenhouse gas emissions. This approach also allows for flexibility as the target of net zero, unlike that of absolute zero, allows for some GHG emissions, as long as those emissions are offset.

#### **4.2.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions**

The preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions listed below are further complemented and expanded in the Sustainability, Climate Change and Energy Conservation Section of the Planning for Complete Communities Discussion Paper. Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the Official Plan Review include the following:

##### Policy Recommendations:

- Recognize the impacts of global climate change on the natural environment and to plan for mitigation of and adaptation to such impacts;
- Promote net zero targets for emissions and greenhouse gas reductions by identifying adaptation measures to respond to impacts from climate change and establishing a long-term target of carbon neutrality for new developments and the Town's facilities, infrastructure and operations;
- Require health, environmental and cumulative air quality impact studies that assess the impact on human health for development with significant known or potential air emission levels near sensitive uses such as schools, daycares and seniors' facilities;
- Consider the potential impacts of climate change that may increase the risk associated with natural hazards as part of all planning decisions;
- Encourage municipal facilities and infrastructure to be designed to minimize their impact on the environment, while also being designed to respond to the impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events;
- Advance energy conservation and efficiency technologies and processes that contribute towards a reduction in greenhouse emission; and,
- Consider sustaining, restoring and enhancing the health and integrity of the natural ecosystem, supporting bio-diversity in the Town and targeting ecological improvements to mitigate the effects of ongoing climate change on natural and biological functions.



### Strategic Directions:

- Promote municipal investment in multimodal transportation, with a focus on sustainable and active transportation, to reduce the impacts of climate change from dependency on the automobile;
- Work with local community organizations to promote environmentally sustainable agricultural practices that minimize environmental and climate change impacts and support the protection of high-quality agricultural soils in the long-term;
- Encourage municipal facilities and infrastructure to be designed to minimize their impact on the environment, while also being designed to respond to the impacts of climate change, such as extreme weather events;
- Foster cooperative discussions with other levels of government and community partners to support and implement locally based climate change adaptation action; and,
- Consider undertaking a Climate Change Action Plan, with input from the Region, to create specific measurable actions and program areas for improving climate adaptation and resilience and identify implementation tools and financing mechanisms (e.g. funding or partnerships).

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## 4.3 Agriculture and Economic Vitality

A key objective of the *Planning Act* is to promote environmentally sustainable development founded by the protection of the agricultural resources. The PPS, 2020 further promotes this by defining Ontario's land-use planning system as one that should be interconnected as sustainable and resilient for people of all ages within the context of a clean and healthy environment and a strong and competitive economy. Also, the protection of prime agricultural land for a diversifying range of agricultural uses is a key component of the PPS, 2020. The PPS, 2020 strongly emphasizes the protection of prime agricultural land with non-agricultural uses being extremely limited and lot creation being discouraged. This includes taking action to conserve land and resources which avoids the need for costly remedial measures to correct problems and supports economic and environmental principles.





**Figure 20: Farmlands, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville**

Provincial plans further provide a framework for comprehensive, integrated, place-based and long-term planning that supports and integrates the principles of strong communities, protection of agricultural areas and economic growth, for the long term. The Growth Plan recognizes the role of the agricultural system in the geographic continuity of the agricultural land base and that the functional and economic connections to the agri-food network will be maintained and enhanced. The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan note the important role of compatible economic activity in rural areas that can foster a diverse range of economic and social activities associated with rural communities, agriculture, tourism, recreation and resource use.

This is also reflected in the aspired vision of the Town Official Plan by supporting the continuation of all forms of agriculture and related uses as an important part of its rural heritage and a major economic contributor. The intent of this is to support and enhance the resource based industries of agriculture and aggregate production, which are the focus of the economy of the rural/agricultural/ environmental area. The Town Official Plan also outlines guidelines for consent in creating or severing lots in agricultural areas. Consents are permitted to include the consolidation of farm holdings, enlarge existing farm lots and for the establishment non-farm uses such as extractive rural operations or commercial recreation uses that conform to the policies of the Official Plan. One consent is permitted for a retiring farmer for a farm which existed as of January 1, 1994 that is 10 hectares (25 acres) or greater in size with the intent that the retiring farmer will reside on the retained lot and will remove himself/herself from the day to day operation of the farm business. Through the Official Plan Review there is an opportunity for the Town to update the land severances and consent policies of the Official Plan to advance the economic opportunities of agricultural lands.



**Figure 21: Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Apple Farm**

Ensuring the integration of agricultural areas and the local economy has been recognized as a notable opportunity for the Town to implement policies to further support the use of rural and



agricultural lands. This is consistent with the goals of provincial plans, and local values, to support a strong, healthy and prosperous rural community that also promotes the vitality to the overall Town. This will allow for the ability to promote the important role of rural communities and industries as a focus of economic, cultural and social activity that support surrounding rural and agricultural areas across the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Opportunities to support a diversified rural economy may be promoted by protecting farmland and the viability of the agri-food sector in rural areas.

Fostering a thriving and integrated rural economy has been a consideration amongst municipalities throughout Ontario and a noteworthy consideration of local economic development planning. The Township of King through its Economic Development Strategy has targeted investment in its agricultural sector through recognizing the role of villages and hamlets in providing locations for small and medium-sized businesses which in turn enhances the character of the Township of King. The Township has also advanced its natural environment as a source for agri-tourism through a wayfinding signage program that has improved visibility for the Township's business and tourism operators. This has allowed the Township to consider the encouragement of a broader range of diverse uses in Greenbelt and Moraine lands to complement business growth in urban cores, including support for more diverse on-farm uses and agricultural sector growth. In addition, the Township has utilized its rural character to raise the profile of the municipality through a place-based approach to marketing that builds on King's unique identity, linking the cultural, social, economic and environmental priorities as excellent potential for success. This includes exploring and promoting the possibility for value-added businesses that will promote local farms and create businesses for the local community such as artisan food, craft brewery and wineries, organic produce and other organic products.



**Figure 22: Farmlands, Township of King**



### 4.3.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions

Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the Official Plan Review include the following:

#### Policy Recommendations:

- Ensure the designation of prime agricultural lands and rural lands based on the Region's MCR refinements to the Provincial Agricultural System mapping;
- Promote environmentally sustainable modes and technologies that create local investment and employment opportunities;
- Update the permitted consent requirements for agricultural lands;
- Maintain significant and productive rural areas to recognize the important role of the lands for agricultural uses, local food production, rural uses, and in providing open space connections between natural areas for habitats;
- Develop land use permissions that provide flexibility to maximize farming;
- Refine policies pertaining to permitted uses within the Agriculture designation, which categorize permitted uses as: agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses, and on-farm diversified uses. This would include establishing criteria to address the Guidelines on Permitted Uses in the Agricultural Area;
- Preserve and protect agricultural lands for the purpose of supporting agricultural land use activities;
- Encourage policies that promote the adaptive reuse of older and/or historical farming related and rural buildings in support of sustainable development;
- Promote tourism and agri-tourism opportunities that build on agricultural and/or natural heritage assets, including agricultural fairs, farmers markets and events;
- Policies should support opportunities for local food, urban and near-urban agriculture, and promote the sustainability of agricultural, agri-food and agri-product businesses through protecting agricultural resources and minimizing land use conflicts;
- Support the growth of a viable local economy by enhancing the quality of place of rural communities;
- Position the Town as a model rural community that strives to balance economic growth with environmental responsibility;
- Incorporate policies to implement the Town's updated Economic Development Strategy (Strategic Action Planning Report, 2020); and,
- Encourage a green economy that responds to the reality of climate change, future energy scarcity and other environmental imperatives.

#### Strategic Directions:

- Consider updating the Town Economic Development Strategy;
- Incentivize diversified and innovative agri-business sectors in addition to traditional rural operations, including but not limited to micro-breweries, cideries, bend and breakfast establishments, that promote enjoyment, education or activities related to farm operations;



- Promote retail and marketing opportunities through the installation of wayfinding signage throughout the Town that maintain and demonstrate the character and function of agricultural lands;
- Partner with community organizations in local food production in community gardens to reduce the need for long-range transportation of food and associated consumption of fossil fuels;
- Support a wide variety of retail opportunities to bring local food and farm products to market by allowing and encouraging farmers market in urbanized areas;
- Secure permanent indoor and outdoor farmers' market for local vendors, with a focus on local and organic foods that can be accessed year-round;
- Build Awareness of the Town's rural economic development potential; and,
- Broaden and build the local business base by investing in business development and support programs and services.

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#### 4.4 Preserving Water

The *Planning Act* recognizes the supply, efficient use and conservation of water as a provincial interest. This is further supported by the PPS, 2020 which directs that planning authorities are to protect, improve or restore the quality and quantity of water through numerous strategies, including identifying water resource systems and maintaining linkages and related functions among ground water features, hydrologic functions, natural heritage features and areas, and surface water features including shoreline areas. The PPS, 2020 also allows for the ability to implement restrictions on development and site alteration to protect all municipal drinking water supplies and designated vulnerable areas.

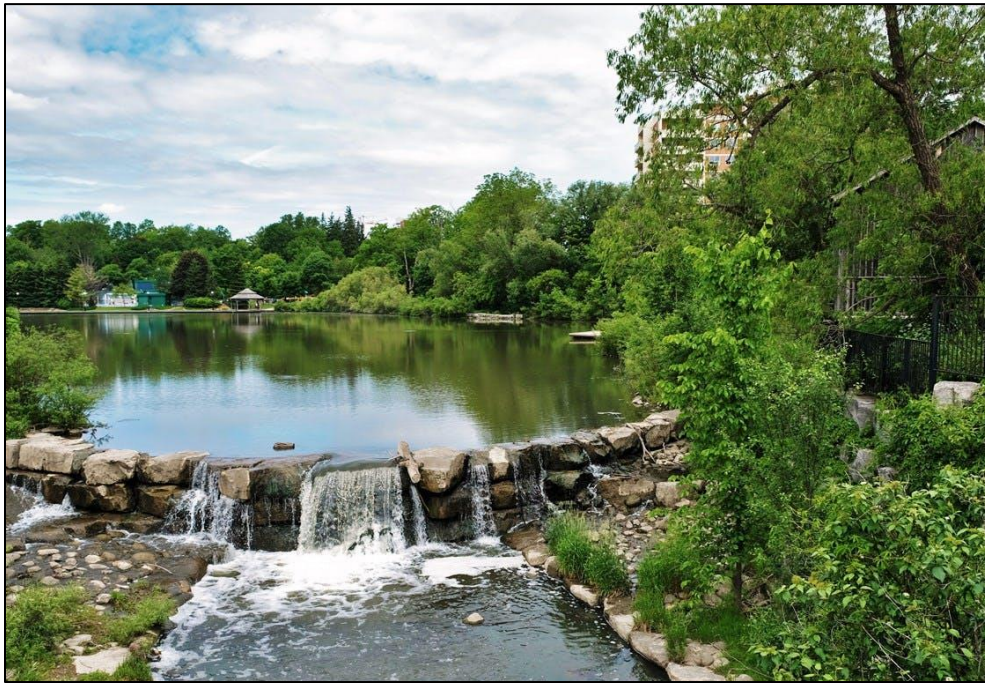
The Growth Plan identifies the long-term protection of key hydrologic features, key hydrologic areas, and their functions by the protection, enhancement, or restoration of the quality and quantity of water in decisions related to the allocations of growth and a watershed planning approach. This is consistent with the policies of the Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan that recognize the importance of proactive planning, design and construction efforts, including stormwater management infrastructure, to protect existing water sources. In addition, the Town Official Plan implements these provincial requirements through the community development principal of protecting the Town's physical resources, particularly the ground and surface water resources, required to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the community. Source Protection Plans are key to achieving this through locally developed policies that, as they are implemented, protect existing and future sources of municipal drinking water. This includes input on natural hazard management and help to regulate development and other activities in areas affected by water-based natural hazards through a permit process.



**Figure 23: Source Water Protection, Conservation Ontario**

Preserving the quality and quantity of water has been identified as an important interest key to sustaining life and prosperity of the Town. The Official Plan Review process provides the opportunity to introduce measures that can further enhance water resources, but also other environmental features and functions that are interconnected, including species and habitats at risk. In addition, this will provide the Town the ability to implement water features and management infrastructure into the core fabric of urbanized areas. This will allow for not only increased access to nature, but also the ability to reduce the potential for hazardous impacts to water quality and water systems as a result of flooding or run-off.

Water quality and quantity is a top consideration for regions and municipalities throughout Ontario. Jurisdictions, such as the Region of Waterloo, for example, have implemented measures to ensure the long-term sustainability and quality of rural water resources. The Region of Waterloo, through its Water Resource Protection Master Plans, focuses on the long-term sustainable use and management of water resources. Waterloo's Water Resource Protection Master Plan is focused primarily on water quality and the Region's approach to managing water quantity at the source. These plans are also part of a greater initiative regarding rural water quality that aim to undertake salt reduction programs, microbial contamination control programs for wells under the influence of surface water and commenting on development applications and contaminated sites. This aims to complement the objectives of the Regional Official Plan by safeguarding drinking-water at the source by preventing unnecessary environmental, economic, social and health costs associated with the loss and/or cleanup of drinking-water resources due to contamination or over use. This proactive approach will help ensure that the Region's municipal drinking-water supply remains clean and plentiful to support current and future generations.



**Figure 24: Silver Lake, Region of Waterloo**

#### **4.4.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions**

Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the Official Plan Review include the following:

Policy Recommendations:

- Protect the form, function, ecological health and floodplain function of watercourses;
- Ensure the quality and quantity of groundwater and surface water and the function of sensitive groundwater recharge/discharge areas, aquifers and headwaters will be protected and enhanced, especially for those stream reaches that are heavily reliant on local sources of groundwater discharge;
- Encourage agricultural operations and land uses that contribute to infiltration of water through soil, limit run-off and the use of eliminate pesticides;
- New policies will be required to implement the two Source Protection Plans (South Georgian Bay Lake Simcoe, and Credit Valley Toronto and Region and Central Lake), with respect to wellhead protection areas and designated vulnerable areas to protect municipal drinking water sources;
- Identify and protect highly vulnerable aquifers and significant groundwater recharge areas, while prohibiting and restricting certain uses which may pose a risk to municipal drinking water sources;
- Encourage significant groundwater infiltration functions to be maintained at the predevelopment levels or enhanced where practical, particularly in those areas identified as hydrogeological sensitive areas;



- Apply best management practices in stormwater management in order to protect groundwater quality and flow and stream baseflow and protect water quality;
- Require all stormwater management facilities to be designed and constructed to meet or exceed provincial requirements for stormwater management best practices;
- Consider innovative forms of sustainable green infrastructure alternatives to stormwater management facilities that manage stormwater and run-off and improve water quality;
- Direct compatible land uses with low imperviousness, including natural areas, parks and open spaces, to potentially significant recharge areas through the development process;
- Ensure development, redevelopment and site alteration be designed with the goal of protecting ground and surface water quality and quantity through the identification of strategies and techniques to maintain and where appropriate restore the function of key hydrologic features demonstrated through master environmental servicing plans or other equivalent studies; and,
- Encourage the design of drainage systems and lot grading in new plans of subdivision to include consideration for cold weather stormwater flows and winter maintenance, which will promote and may require the strategic design of new road networks to reduce the need for road salt application.

#### Strategic Directions

- Recognize, prioritize and respond to water-related issues caused by global climate change, including impacts that may affect water quantity and quality;
- Support, encourage and implement measures and activities which reduce water consumption, wastewater and stormwater flows and improve water quality;
- Consider a review of municipal operations to reduce unintended impacts to water quality, such as salting operations, public land maintenance, etc.;
- Promote educational opportunities and programs regarding the importance of Source Water Protection Plans to the quantity and quality of tap water;
- Minimize the potential for contamination, including potential contamination from de-icing salts, on sources of municipal drinking water through promoting sustainable salting for activities undertaken by the Town; and,
- Provide advice to landowners to promote good stewardship practices for lands and water within Source Water Protection Areas.

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## 4.5 Accessible Nature

The *Planning Act* directs the need for a built form to be supported by public spaces that are high quality, safe, accessible, attractive and vibrant. The PPS, 2020 further promotes this by requiring planning for a full range and equitable distribution of publicly accessible built and natural settings for recreation, including facilities, parklands, public spaces, open space areas, trails and linkages, and, where practical, water-based resources.

A healthy natural environment with clean air, land, and water is defined as a key characteristic for the Greater Golden Horseshoe long term vision as described in the Growth Plan. The Greenbelt, including significant natural features, such as the Oak Ridges Moraine, will continue to be



enhanced and protected. The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan recognize the opportunities the natural landscapes can provide in promoting sustainable and healthy communities through allowing for access to recreational points via trails, natural resources and wildlife habitats. The Town Official Plan also promotes trails, natural corridors and linkages in the Oak Ridges Moraine and Greenlands System as a way to connect residents to the open spaces and natural resources. In addition, this serves to connect urbanized areas with internal and surrounding natural spaces.



**Figure 25 City of Toronto, Pollinator Garden**

Access to nature is an important indicator to the quality of life a community can provide. Interacting with nature, and learning about its forms and functions, has the ability to yield positive communal benefits related to health, social interaction and economic sustainability. This is an important topic for the Town to examine during the Official Plan Review Process as it also allows for critical thought on how the natural environment can be made accessible to people of all ages and abilities. This includes reconsidering the design and construction of open spaces, trails, walking paths and playgrounds. Allowing for opportunities for residents to interact with the natural environment throughout various activities of daily life will promote a high quality of life founded on an understanding of the diverse needs and desires of all community members in their connection with the natural environment.

Increasing access to quality natural spaces that dually serve to protect and enhance the environment is an ongoing consideration for jurisdictions throughout Ontario. The City of Toronto for example, has innovatively developed a Pollinator Protection Strategy that identifies a set of guiding principles, priorities and actions that the City and community can take to protect the diverse native pollinator community. This includes using native plants, trees and shrubs as much as possible given the greatest threat to pollinators existence is the loss or habitat. To promote an understanding of pollinators and to personalize the importance of the initiative, the Strategy puts forth the goal of identifying at least one City-managed site in each ward that can be enhanced for pollinators and serve as model gardens. This example demonstrates the ability for municipalities to utilize public lands to both enhance the natural environment and provide opportunities for local residents to learn and appreciate the role of local habitats in their local communities through observing its ecological importance to the spaces they recreate in and frequent on a regular basis.



#### 4.5.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions

Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the Official Plan Review include the following:

##### Policy Recommendations:

- Ensure that every person lives within a 15-minute walk of a park, trail, greenway, open space or other green space;
- Integrate the natural system between policy areas and communities into a more cohesive greenlands/natural heritage system, as identified and refined by the Region's MCR;
- Include definitions and mandates for smaller or linear greenspaces as part of the park hierarchy which would allow for alternative spaces to be incorporated in new and redevelopment areas;
- Promote the development of a comprehensive parks, open space and trails to encourage a comprehensive network throughout the entire Town;
- Ensure that the construction of public infrastructure, or expansions to existing infrastructure, occurs in a manner that is compatible with adjacent land uses, incorporates healthy oriented design and minimizes environmental impacts;
- Target public space improvement through sidewalk presence, pedestrian-level street lighting, public seating, tree plantings, cycling paths, traffic calmers, textured rights-of-way and guiding pathways and public art to improve access, comfort, safety and cultural activities;
- Promote integration / connection of open spaces to provide equitable distribution and use;
- Implement measures to ensure trails are accessible to wheelchair users and seniors; and
- There is also an opportunity for the Official Plan Review to include policies related to cultural planning, arts and leisure, at a high level. However, the Town could consider an update to the Leisure and Community Services Master Plan, which could provide specific policy recommendations, which could be incorporated into Official Plan Review process, pending the timing of the studies.

##### Strategic Directions:

- Foster support for community gardening, in partnership with local agencies and community groups, including the York Region Food Council;
- Encourage the use of Town lands, and public lands, where feasible, to incorporate native species and installation of display boards to promote an understanding of local natural features and functions. This can include showcasing a natural feature, function or habitat unique to each Ward and the installation of community led gardens;
- Promote regular maintenance of trails, parks, public outdoor venues and open spaces by the Town, including in the winter when possible;
- Provide an interconnected system of public trails and clear signage that can help users decide how best to enjoy the trail experience according to their needs and abilities;
- Target trail upgrading through repair and maintenance, better lighting and clear signage to promote safety and higher usage volumes;



- Consider playground development or refurbishment of neighbourhood activity spaces for young children of all abilities, including seating and tables to accommodate supervising adults and wheelchair users to enhance safety and social interaction; and,
- Consider recent Provincial changes to the development charges and parkland dedication regulations and the implementation of community benefits charge authority, an update is required to consider the implications on parkland dedication and acquisition. In order to implement the community benefits charge, the Town will be required to prepare a Community Benefits Strategy and By-law and associated Parks Plan for the acquisition of parkland.

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## 4.6 Promoting Health and Wellbeing

The *Planning Act* states that an important provincial interest is the health and wellbeing of Ontarians. This is to be achieved by orderly development of safe communities that promote wellbeing and the adequate provision and distribution of educational, health, social, cultural and recreational facilities. The PPS, 2020 further supports this objective by recognizing strong, liveable and healthy communities that promote and enhance human health and social wellbeing are in return economically and environmentally sound and resilient to climate change. The PPS, 2020 also directs development away from areas of natural and human-made hazards. This preventative approach supports provincial and municipal financial well-being over the long term, protects public health and safety, and minimizes cost, risk and social disruption.

The Growth Plan also asserts the role of natural areas and agricultural lands in providing a significant contribution to the region's resilience and ability for the provision of healthy, local food for future generations through farming that is productive, diverse, and sustainable. The Oak Ridges Moraine Conservation Plan and Greenbelt Plan, consistent with the other provincial policies, emphasize the role of ecological resources in contributing to the health of local residents and ecosystems. Ensuring a healthy community is also a primary principle of the Town Official Plan through encouraging a broad-based planning approach that will maintain and enhance the health of the community and its residents. Determinants of this healthy community include a sense of belonging and social and safety features found in a caring community, as well as environmental qualities.



**Figure 26: Winter Trail, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville**



Health and wellbeing are often of first and foremost interest to an individual. Without consideration to health, the ability for a community to economically thrive and provide residents high quality opportunities for social interaction and physical and mental wellbeing is limited. The interest of envisioning innovative methods for linking health outcomes to the natural environment will allow the Town to consider through the Official Plan Review various approaches to promoting lifestyles shaped by active interaction with the outdoors. This is supported by the Town Leisure and Community Services Master Plan that is intended to provide residents with equitable access to programs/events and facilities that enhance and promote healthy and active living. It assists in guiding the location and creation of new facilities, outlines strategies for the optimal use of existing facilities and the development of parks services, provides recommendations for increased participation in a variety of programs and, where possible the enhancement and effective delivery of services. In addition, the Town's Active Transportation Servicing Plan aims to determine the infrastructure requirements for the development of an integrated pedestrian and cycling network for the Communities of Stouffville and Ballantrae-Musselman's Lake. This includes identifying where new sidewalks are to be constructed in existing neighbourhoods currently without sidewalks, along with determining locations for dedicated on-road bicycle lanes with no on-street parking. These initiatives recognize the role of interactions with the outdoors are key to a healthy lifestyle characterized by the ability to undertake daily necessities in a sustainable and efficient manner.



**Figure 27: Community Garden, Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville Landscape**

Throughout Ontario communities continue to prioritize physical and mental health through various forms of activities in public outdoor spaces. The City of Vaughan Official Plan, for example, establishes the need to maintain a prominent and accessible countryside within the City to allow residents to realize the many benefits of such a close association with this land. This is in recognition of the valuable functions that natural areas can produce in food production, wildlife habitat and the ability of forests and watercourses to clean toxins from water and air, in addition to a wide range of opportunities for accessible passive and active recreation. The City has also implemented the Active Together Master Plan relating to open spaces and a park land system given the essential spaces they provide for social interaction and physical and mental wellbeing. The City has leveraged the changing demographics of its residents to inform and guide its plans



for the provision of high quality equitable access to natural spaces to ensure the health of all can be advanced. As it relates to a growing seniors' population, accessibility and geographic factors are a priority to the location of parks. In addition, the City's rich cultural diversity has shaped its approach to planning for open spaces and parks by providing recreational opportunities similar to those in their country of origin. This not only provides for an increased sense of belonging, but also for parks to serve as venues for ethnic and religious groups to gather, relax and celebrate in an informal atmosphere.



**Figure 28: Park, City of Vaughan**

#### **4.6.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions**

The preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions listed below are further complemented and expanded in the Healthy Communities Section of the Planning for Complete Communities Discussion Paper. Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the Official Plan Review include the following:

##### Policy Recommendations:

- Provide easy and safe access to natural green and blue environments, particularly ones that encourage involvement with nature and provide opportunities for people to be physically active;
- Leverage the changing demographics of the community to help inform and guide the Town's plans for the provision of high quality equitable access to natural spaces to ensure the health of all can be advanced;
- Include policies that recognize active transportation as a healthy lifestyle shift toward more sustainable transportation modes for daily needs;
- Implement dedicated spaces for exercise such as football pitches, tennis courts, running routes, walking loops, trails, outdoor gyms and other venues in parks that are meaningful to local residents; and,
- Support and encourage local food systems and local food production to promote healthy lifestyles, provide affordable food options, contribute to sustainability, support economic growth and increase local food security.



### Strategic Directions:

- Promote community gardens for growing on portions of open space particularly in areas where residents do not have convenient walking access to sources of fresh food;
- Promote exercise, hiking, mountain biking, bird watching and other active and passive recreational activities in natural areas associated with multiple health impacts such as improved mood, reduced stress, improved sleep, and feelings of purpose and accomplishment; and,
- Consider playground development or refurbishment of neighbourhood activity spaces for young children, including seating to accommodate supervising adults to enhance safety and social interaction.

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## 4.7 Environmental Stewardship

Provincial policies and plans, including the Greenbelt Plan, recognize that the protection and enhancement of the natural environment is a shared responsibility among a variety of community stakeholders. Based on good land stewardship practices for public and private lands, the Growth Plan states that for natural heritage to thrive, rural areas and their service sectors, including farming, play a vital role in environmental stewardship. The Town Official Plan incorporates a stewardship program that uses available resources to develop and implement a program to educate property owners, including farmers, about the natural environment of the area they live in, and the manner in which they can operate their household and workplace to manage their property to reduce negative impacts on natural systems.

Environmental stewardship has been identified as an important element to protecting natural heritage through the ability to promote a more environmentally aware and involved community. This would allow the community to understand the impact of the environment on their lives, and in return, the impact of their lives on the environment. The Official Plan Review allows for opportunities to implement further environmental stewardship measures to support increased social interaction and recreational benefits through connecting residents with each other in nature while learning about its functions and putting forth action to ensure its sustained use in the community.

Promoting community involvement by achieving common environmental objectives is a consideration of many jurisdictions in Ontario to further promote a sense of belonging and purpose to the communities they live within. The City of Richmond Hill has implemented the Healthy Yards Program to involve residents in the process of naturalizing residential green spaces. Key actions include resident education and assistance with native plant selection that will help create new habitats for native species and increase the ecological functions provided by residential yards. The Healthy Yards Program offers two native species plant kits each April and May to residents through the City's website. In addition, there is a limit of one kit per resident at a nominal charge. Included are either two trees/shrubs with 18 wildflowers, or five trees/shrubs with 18 wildflowers. Rain barrels are also available. All plants are approved native species and contribute to re-establishing the municipality's natural heritage. Included with the kit is information on



naturalization, alternatives to pesticides and the role of native plant species in combating invasive species, reducing water consumption and reducing maintenance costs and time.



**Figure 29: Naturalized Front Yard**

#### **4.7.1 Preliminary Policy Recommendations and Strategic Directions**

Preliminary policy recommendations and strategic directions for the Town as part of the OPR include the following:

##### Policy Recommendations:

- Include policies and tools to support/promote sustainability and energy conservation by private land owners and developers;
- Include policies which promote a culture of conservation among all public, private, and community groups and local citizens and aim to reduce energy use in all sectors; and,
- Include policies which promote and encourage agricultural businesses and homeowner participation in programs that reward or incentivize investments in energy efficient technologies.

##### Strategic Directions:

- Promote an environmentally aware community culture through public information campaigns to lead a change in behaviours in support of a more responsible and sustainable approach that will minimize impact on the environment and contribute to reversing climate change;
- Implement recognition opportunities for local residents, businesses and organizations who significantly contribute to improving the Town's environment, sustainability and quality of life;



- The Town will work with the conservation authorities to encourage restoration, enhancement, stewardship and management of lands identified by conservation authorities as part of their natural heritage systems;
- Promote Nature's Classroom sessions. These educational sessions for groups of 10 to 25 people are designed to teach participants about the forest ecosystem and its importance to the community. Each session includes a guided forest hike and programs focus on diverse themes including trees, wildlife, the Forest at night, fitness activities and snowshoeing; and,
- Consider opportunities for committing the funds and resources necessary to incentivize the creation and maintenance of high-quality open spaces, community gardens and parks.



## 5 NEXT STEPS

This Discussion Paper is one of four Papers, which are being completed within Phase 2 'Background Studies and Discussion Papers' of the OPR. The four Discussion Papers follow the focus areas of the OPR. This Discussion Paper has been drafted initially based on a background review, research and initial consultation with the Town. It has also been informed by the Community Visioning Consultations undertaken in Phase 1. The directions and recommendations presented in this report will be refined through consultation with the public as part of future consultations.

This is a starting point for generating discussion about general policy issues that will take place in Phase 2 of the Official Plan Review. Feedback opportunities for a full range of stakeholders to provide input and insight on these policy issues will be available in Phase 2 of the project.

The critical analysis of policy gaps, such as the need to incorporate appropriate energy and climate change considerations, provincial and regional conformity requirements and planning trends related to land use permissions to allow for flexibility to maximize farming, for example, in addition to a robust community engagement program, will be integrated to set the stage for drafting the new Official Plan and Schedules.

The information obtained will help formulate a series of Policy Direction Reports and the development of a brand new Official Plan and Schedules to implement the preferred policy directions and to address policy conformity gaps identified throughout the OPR.

Discussion Papers detailing each of the Official Plan Review Focus Areas can be accessed online [www.cometogetherws.ca/opr](http://www.cometogetherws.ca/opr).

### **Provide Your Comments:**

Comments and feedback on the Discussion Papers can be provided through the webpage or emailed to: [opreview@townofws.ca](mailto:opreview@townofws.ca).