

## REPORT TO COUNTY COUNCIL

# Phase 2 Official Plan Review (Environmental Policies) – Suggested Policy Directions

**To:** Warden and Members of County Council

**From:** Director of Community Planning

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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**1. That County Council direct Planning staff to proceed with engagement on the Suggested Environmental Policy Directions that have been developed to further inform Phase 2 of the County's Official Plan review, as generally outlined in Report CP 2023-289;**

**2. And further, that Report CP 2023-289 be circulated to the Area Municipalities for information.**

## REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

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- The purpose of this report is to present Council with the Suggested (Environmental) Policy Directions paper that is proposed to serve as the general basis for community engagement and input on potential updates to the County's environmental policies as part of Phase 2 of the County's Official Plan review process (i.e., Phase 1 consisted of updates to the County's Agricultural Policies).
- The primary purpose of updates to the environmental policies is to ensure they are consistent with current requirements under the Planning Act, and ensure they continue to reflect local planning goals and objectives.
- This report includes a number of background documents which provide the more detailed technical basis and land use planning rationale for the various environmental policy directions currently being suggested. This report and related attachments are intended to form the basis for further community and stakeholder engagement.
- Pending Council's approval of the report recommendations staff will proceed with the next steps (as generally set out in this report) to obtain further community and stakeholder input on the suggested directions for policy development.

## IMPLEMENTATION POINTS

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The review and update of the County's environmental policies constitutes the second phase of the current Official Plan review process. The primary purpose of this review is to identify any updates to the policies that may need to be considered to ensure they are consistent with relevant Provincial legislation, plans, policies, and guidelines, as required by the Planning Act, including the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), 2020. However, revisions to improve overall intent, clarity, and implementation, and to better reflect local strategies/plans and related goals and objectives are also being considered.

There are a number of directions being considered as part of the Official Plan update which would go somewhat beyond the minimum requirements set out in the PPS in order to help better achieve Oxford's goal of preserving and enhancing the natural environment, including climate change mitigation and adaptation, as expressed through the County's strategic plan.

### Financial Impact

No immediate implications beyond this year's approved budget. Any additional funding that may be required for future phases will be considered as part of the annual budget process.

### Communications

Community engagement is an important component of the Official Plan review process, including the proposed review and update of the County's environmental policies. Staff have considered the feedback received in June 2022 from the Area Municipalities, the Agricultural and Planning Advisory Committee, Woodstock Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC), along with other groups and the public, which is detailed further in the background section below.

As part of the next round of engagement, planning staff will be seeking further input on suggested policies directions to help inform the development of draft policies. This round of engagement is proposed to include a mix of in-person and on-line engagement opportunities and consultation/engagement with:

- The Province and the various agencies prescribed under the Planning Act (e.g. conservation authorities, utility providers, railways, abutting municipalities etc.);
- County and Area Municipal Staff and Councils;
- Indigenous communities; and
- Other identified stakeholder groups, interested parties and the broader public.

Additional information on the planned engagement opportunities is provided under Next Steps.




## 2023-2026 STRATEGIC PLAN

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Oxford County Council approved the [2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#) on September 13, 2023. The Plan outlines 39 goals across three strategic pillars that advance Council's vision of "Working together for a healthy, vibrant, and sustainable future." These pillars are: (1) *Promoting community vitality*, (2) *Enhancing environmental sustainability*, and (3) *Fostering progressive government*.

The recommendations in this report supports the following strategic goals.

**Strategic Plan Pillars and Goals**

PILLAR 1	PILLAR 2	PILLAR 3
		
<b>Promoting community vitality</b>	<b>Enhancing environmental sustainability</b>	<b>Fostering progressive government</b>
<p>Goal 1.2 – Sustainable infrastructure and development</p> <p>Goal 1.3 – Community health, safety and well-being</p>	<p>Goal 2.1 – Climate change mitigation and adaptation</p> <p>Goal 2.2 – Preserve and enhance our natural environment</p>	<p>Goal 3.2 – Collaborate with our partners and communities</p>

See: [Oxford County 2023-2026 Strategic Plan](#)

**DISCUSSION**

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**Background**

The Planning Act requires that municipalities adopt an Official Plan (OP) to serve as the primary legal document for implementing provincial land use planning direction at the municipal level.

As described in report [CP 2021-336](#), the County OP provides that direction for both the County and the eight area municipalities that comprise the County. The policies and land use schedules contained in the OP establish the overall vision and land use strategy for growth and development in the County. This is accomplished by setting out locational, development review and other requirements for a full range of land uses (e.g., residential, commercial, industrial, institutional, parks and recreation, agriculture, etc.) and providing direction with respect to matters such as the provision of infrastructure and public services, the protection of agricultural land and natural and cultural heritage features, and avoiding or mitigating the potential impacts from natural and man-made hazards.

As discussed in [CP 2022-48](#) this second phase of the OP update is focused on Section 3.2 of the OP which currently provides policy direction on:

- Natural Heritage System (including implementation tools, and environmental study requirements and management policies);
- Water Resources (including watershed and sub-watershed planning and source protection);
- Open Space;
- Soil Resources;

- Natural Hazards; and,
- Energy Efficiency and Air Quality

It is noted that, unlike other amendments to the OP that are approved by County Council, the Province (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing) is the approval authority for any amendments to the County's OP that are undertaken as part of an OP review process under Section 26 of the Planning Act. As such, following adoption by County Council, all amendments that form part of the County's OP review process will need to be sent to the Province for approval.

As part of their approval, the Province has the authority to impose any modifications to the County's adopted policies that it determines to be necessary to ensure they are consistent with Provincial legislation and policies.

### Background Review and Preliminary Engagement

Input from engagement in June 2022 included feedback from the Area Municipalities, the Agricultural and Planning Advisory Committee, Woodstock Environmental Advisory Committee (EAC), along with other groups and the public. The results from the feedback received indicated a number of common areas of interest/concern by respondents, including:

- A desire and general support for improving/increasing protection of natural spaces, rivers and streams;
- General support for planning for watershed health, restoration, and improvement of rivers, streams, and water resources;
- Protect natural spaces to support species that inhabit those areas, including species at risk;
- Ensure the farming community is involved in policy development and be clear on how policies and recommendations will, or will not, impact and support farmers;
- Incorporate and reflect parts of the community's sustainability plan (Future Oxford) in the OP
- Recognize that the rivers and valleys in the County provide important recreational opportunities with many trails, canoeing opportunities, and more;
- Improve and provide clarity regarding environmental study requirements, as generally implemented through development processes, and develop technical guidance to support implementation;
- Public parks and community green spaces are highly valued and provide opportunities for recreation, supporting health and wellness, and access to nature. These values should be recognized and these areas protected for long-term public use; and
- A desire for increased number and amount of parks and greenspace within Oxford.

In addition to the early input above, Staff have also reviewed relevant legislation, regulations, policies and guidelines and undertaken extensive background research and review of various documents, reports, data and other information in order to inform the potential environmental policy updates including, but not limited to:

- Updates to the Planning Act and associated regulations, the Provincial Policy Statement (PPS), 2020, and draft 2023 updates to the PPS;
- Provincial guidelines related to PPS implementation, including:
  - [Natural Heritage Reference Manual](#), and [Significant Wildlife Habitat Technical Guide](#) and [Criteria Schedules for Ecoregion 6E and Ecoregion 7E](#);
  - [Wildland Fire Risk Assessment and Mitigation Reference Manual](#);
  - [Draft Watershed Planning Guidance](#) and [draft Subwatershed Planning Guidance](#);
- Other provincial or federal legislation including the Conservation Authorities Act, Species At

- Risk Act, Endangered Species Act, the Fisheries Act, Excesses Soil regulations, etc.;
- Official plans from other municipalities with similar land use contexts (e.g. prime agricultural areas with a mix of urban and rural settlements), with a focus on those currently under review or recently approved by the Province;
- Relevant planning applications and related decisions (local and Ontario Municipal Board/Land Tribunal);
- Review of various related studies, research, reports, and other supporting materials;
- GIS analysis of spatial data and related information; and
- Review of County and Area Municipal studies, strategies and master plans relating to parks, open space and trails, renewable energy and climate change, water protection (e.g. source water) and infrastructure (i.e. transportation, water and wastewater etc.).

## Comments

Through the strategic plan, County Council has expressed a desire to improve the environmental sustainability of Oxford, including the preservation and enhancement of the natural environment and climate change mitigation and adaptation. Opportunities to implement this direction through land use planning and other potential measures will be included as one of the many considerations in this phase of the OP review.

This report includes the following attachments to help establish the technical basis and land use planning rationale for the various environmental policy directions currently being suggested.

- Suggested Policy Directions (Attachment 1)
- Draft Oxford Natural Heritage Systems Study (ONHSS) 2023 (Attachment 2)
- ONHSS Recommendations Summary (Attachment 3)

This report and the above attachments are intended to form the basis for further community and stakeholder engagement. Further discussion of these attachments is provided as follows:

### Oxford Natural Heritage Systems Study (ONHSS) 2023

The Oxford Natural Heritage System Study (ONHSS) provides a science-based approach for understanding the existing inventory of natural heritage features and areas within Oxford, and how these features work together as part of a landscape level terrestrial system which also connects to neighbouring municipalities and their watersheds and sub-watersheds. First initiated in 2006, the ONHSS has been reviewed and updated several times, and has served as primary background document for identifying the current inventory of natural heritage features and areas in the County. Updates have generally occurred on a five-year basis in order to monitor natural succession, as well as human influenced changes on the landscape (e.g. vegetation loss through development and other human activity), and have also benefited from steady improvements in technology, including the quality of aerial imagery. The 2023 update uses aerial imagery from 2020 to provide the most current inventory for the County. This updated data also provides a unique opportunity to assess longer term trends and changes on the landscape, given the generally consistent methodology with past updates.

The ONHSS data is also used to help inform secondary planning, master planning and other County and Area Municipal projects (including development proposals/review) with respect to natural heritage related considerations and the potential need for more detailed studies.

A copy of the updated draft ONHSS 2023 study is included as Attachment 2 to this report. The inclusion of information from the ONHSS, as a background technical document, will be used to help inform the updates to the natural heritage policies in the OP as well as other policy updates, where applicable (e.g., natural hazards, water resources, etc.). As a starting point in this regard, the ONHSS 2023 has been used to inform the Suggested Policy Directions document in Attachment 1.

The ONHSS recognizes that the protection of natural areas for the long term through land use planning (e.g. Official Plan policies and development review process) is one tool to help assist with the protection and restoration of biodiversity (i.e. all living things and how they interact) and overall environmental sustainability, there are a number of other potential tools and measures beyond land use planning that likely also warrant consideration (e.g. expanding stewardship, partnership and education programs, establishing goals and targets for restoration and biodiversity initiatives, management directives for municipal programs, property and infrastructure, etc.). To this end there are a range of implementation recommendations in the ONHSS that will help inform the OP update and other related implementation initiatives.

A summary of the ONHSS recommendations are included in Attachment 3. This summary provides an indication of the recommendations that will be specifically considered through the current OP update, those that have been previously considered/addressed, and those that are expected to inform consideration of future implementation options. Updating the environmental policies in the Official Plan is the current priority, however, once those updates have been completed staff intend to bring a follow up report to Council to further discuss and consider various other potential implementation measures and related considerations/implications, including those recommended by the ONHSS.

### **Suggested Policy Directions**

The paper entitled 'Suggested Policy Directions' included as Attachment 1 was prepared by planning staff based on extensive background review and feedback from initial public engagement in June of 2022. This paper provides a detailed discussion of the various Provincial requirements, technical considerations, and opportunities for updating the environmental policies in the OP. This includes discussion of the many related legislative requirements, Provincial standards and guidelines, and local goals and initiatives (i.e. County, Area Municipal and broader community).

Each section includes a discussion regarding various requirements, opportunities and related technical information and concludes with suggested policy directions. Feedback and discussion on these directions is intended to assist staff in improving, refining, and confirming these initial policy directions, so that information can be used to inform the development of a future 'consultation draft' of new OP policies and related mapping updates (where applicable).

While the PPS establishes minimum requirements for planning for various matters of provincial interest related to the natural environment (e.g., natural heritage systems, water resource systems, natural hazards, etc.), the County may also choose to establish more protective policies than the PPS, based on the local circumstances and objectives, provided doing so would not conflict with any other policy of the PPS. In this regard, it is noted that the existing Official Plan



policies are already more protective and proactive than the minimum provincial requirements, in some cases.

There are a number of directions included in this paper which, as proposed, would continue to go beyond the minimum PPS requirements to help achieve Oxford's strategic goal of preservation and enhancement of the natural environment, including climate change mitigation and adaptation. More specifically these directions are intended to:

- Inform policy development that supports community biodiversity and climate goals;
- Help recognize the local context, vulnerabilities and opportunities related to environmental protection, management and enhancement;
- Incorporate and encourage conservation and restoration of natural areas and ecosystems;
- Support sustainable land use practices which can help reduce habitat fragmentation, promote green infrastructure, and enhance biodiversity;
- Incorporate approaches to support climate resilience into the OP, such as encouraging infrastructure improvements, enhanced flood mitigation, and adaptation strategies that protect communities and natural systems;
- Increase resilience, as biodiversity and climate planning can help improve and mitigate the impacts of climate-related disasters and ecological shifts;
- Contribute to improving health and well-being as improved air and water quality, access to green spaces, and reduced heat islands enhance residents' quality of life;
- Support the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and promotion of renewable energy, sustainable development practices, and incorporation of green infrastructure; and
- Promote education and engagement, as increasing awareness and involving the community in conservation efforts are essential for long-term success.

The following represents a high-level summary of the key policy sections covered in the policy paper and suggested policy directions outlined in each section.

### **Natural Heritage System**

Planning for natural heritage using a systems-based approach is a strategic way to help address biodiversity loss, potential negative impacts from land use change and the uncertainties of climate change. The intent being to ensure the County's natural heritage system can sustain present and future generations, while also working toward achievement of a 'net environmental gain' over time. As a minimum, the PPS requires that municipalities identify natural heritage systems and protect natural heritage features and areas for the long-term. Further, that the diversity and connectivity of natural features in an area, and the long-term ecological function and biodiversity of natural heritage systems, should be maintained, restored or, where possible, improved.

Protecting natural heritage systems is key to maintaining and enhancing environmental health and ecological integrity, long-term quality of life, and the various local economic benefits that are dependent on the ecological goods and services (e.g. food, water, timber, air purification, soil creation, and pollination, etc.) that the natural heritage system provides.

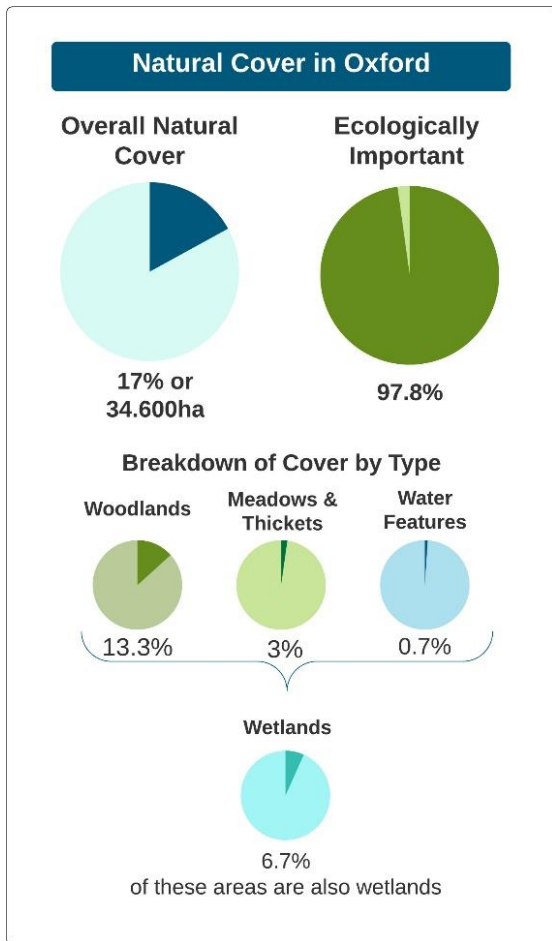


Figure 1. shows a summary of the current natural cover in Oxford, based on 2020 aerial imagery as assessed through the current ONHSS.

In many respects virtually all of the remaining natural cover, rivers and streams in Oxford can be considered “ecologically important” as their ecological and hydrological functions contribute to and support Oxford’s overall ecological health and biodiversity (i.e. the variety and types of ecosystems and species). Further, these natural areas provide a range of ecological goods and services (e.g. groundwater protection, water treatment, flood control, air quality improvement, temperature moderation etc.) and also contribute to overall community health and well-being (i.e. by providing access to nature and opportunities for outdoor recreation and relaxation). Maintaining, enhancing and restoring these features and areas is key to ensuring they are able to continue to provide these environmental and community benefits.

Developing a new natural heritage system as part of the OP update will involve identifying and establishing policies for various natural heritage features and areas (e.g. woodlands, wetlands, valleylands etc.), as well as recognizing the linkages between and among these features and water resources (e.g. surface and ground water systems).

One of the purposes of identifying and protecting, enhancing and restoring natural heritage systems is to support their ecological functions (e.g. production of food and water; regulating temperature, flooding and filtering water; fixing nitrogen, oxygen production etc.) and biodiversity for the long term. Biodiversity generally refers to the variety of all living things and their interactions and is often broken into three groups: ecosystem diversity, species diversity and genetic diversity. Natural heritage systems planning focuses primarily on aspects of ecosystem diversity and to a lesser extent species diversity, with limited consideration of genetic diversity.

Land use planning tools and approaches can help to support and protect biodiversity by:

- Using various planning tools to identify and protect natural heritage features and areas for the long term (e.g. land use designations and zoning), including directing development away from ecologically important areas and/or requiring appropriate studies and measures to ensure development proposed within or adjacent to such areas will not have a negative impact;
- Establishing appropriate mitigation requirements (e.g., buffers, enhancement and restoration measures, water balance requirements, etc.) to help maintain and enhance natural heritage features and areas;
- Promoting incorporation of ecosystem considerations into community design/new development (i.e., using native species, incorporating pollinator species, managing invasive species, etc.); and,



- Serving as an education and integration tool for other municipal and agency requirements and processes/programs (i.e., CA regulations, by-laws, stewardship programs, etc.)

Recognition and inclusion of biodiversity in any updated OP policies, together with the updated natural heritage inventory in the ONHSS, would also help to inform other environmental related plans and initiatives (e.g. expanding stewardship, partnership and education programs; establishing goals and targets for restoration and biodiversity initiatives etc.). These could then potentially be further expanded upon through the development of a Biodiversity Strategy as identified in Future Oxford sustainability plan, if deemed necessary and/or appropriate.

Potential updates to the County's natural heritage policies will build from the existing OP policy framework and are currently suggested to include, but are not necessarily limited to:

- Maintaining and expanding the 'net environmental gain' concept/principle in the current OP policies as part of a new natural heritage system framework;
- Establishing a new natural heritage system and related policies to protect all ecologically important features, not just those that are 'provincially significant', as virtually all of the remaining natural cover in Oxford is important for sustaining ecological and hydrological functions to support biodiversity and minimize the risks/impacts from a changing climate;
- Incorporating provincial and federal requirements to protect fish habitat, support the protection, restoration and enhancement of riparian areas (i.e. lands along the edges of rivers, streams, lakes, and other water bodies) and shorelines and improved fish passage, and reflect provincial and federal requirements for species at risk;
- Recognize the importance of terrestrial (i.e. land based) and hydrological (i.e. water based) linkages and connectivity and incorporate requirements to protect linkages in areas where significant land use change (e.g. settlement expansion, new non-agricultural use) is being proposed and support the identification of opportunities to restore and enhance connectivity throughout Oxford (e.g. secondary planning, stewardship activities etc.), where possible; and,
- Incorporate policies to support ecological and environmental related opportunities (e.g. urban forestry, promoting native species, pollinators, road ecology, invasive species management, etc.) as part of development and other programs, projects, and initiatives, where opportunities exist.

The updates to the natural heritage policies will also need to recognize and support the ability of agricultural land uses to continue, as required by the PPS. As such, the primary focus of identifying natural heritage systems in the agricultural landscape will be on recognizing existing features and areas and how they are connected and to ensure that new non-agricultural development is generally directed away from such areas or requires appropriate studies to ensure there will be no negative impacts.

That said, it is also recognized that the bulk of the remaining natural features and areas in Oxford are located within the County's agricultural area. As such, policies could be considered to recognize that these areas represent some of the greatest opportunities for the implementation of voluntary stewardship, enhancement and restoration initiatives to increase natural cover, ecological function and/or biodiversity, by working with farmers and rural residents where there is interest and support.

Other potential policy directions include updating environmental study (e.g. EIS) requirements to help provide greater clarity and consistency for establishing the scope of studies and improving the process associated with their review. This would include updated requirements for adjacent lands, mitigative standards and approaches based on Provincial and Federal requirements and

guidance, and providing greater direction to guide the implementation of the recommendations of environmental studies.

### **Water Resource System**

As Oxford is an entirely ground water dependant community, it is critically important that the quality and quantity of the County's water sources be protected, improved and restored. Updating the water resource policies in the Official Plan provides an opportunity to consider appropriate measures to further protect both the County's municipal drinking water supplies and surface and groundwater features such as rivers and streams, wetlands, areas of ground water recharge and discharge (seeps and springs).

Any proposed updates would build from the existing OP policies which:

- Encourage watercourses and drainage systems to remain open and in a natural state and incorporating naturalized and vegetative buffers and meet other legislative requirements;
- Set out requirements for enhancement and protection of surface water features where development is adjacent to such features;
- Require studies to understand the potential cumulative impacts of development on water quantity; and
- Support and encourage municipal by-laws and other approaches to address water conservation and efficiency, in addition to education and outreach.

Following is a summary of the potential updates to this OP policy framework currently being suggested for consideration:

- Incorporating a water resource system into the OP that will help ensure that the County's water resources continue to be available to accommodate growth, sustain the natural heritage system, and have resilience to deal with the impacts from a changing climate;
- Recognizing that there are linkages and related functions among ground water features, natural heritage features and areas, and surface water features (e.g. streams, rivers, headwater areas), and that these linkages need to be maintained;
- Utilizing Source Water Protection Plans and related tools to implement restrictions, where they are necessary, on development and site alteration to protect all municipal drinking water supplies and designated vulnerable areas and to protect, improve or restore vulnerable surface and ground water, sensitive surface water features, and sensitive ground water features and their functions;
- Updating the existing stormwater management policies to reflect current PPS requirements with respect to minimizing or, where possible, preventing increases in contaminant loads, minimizing erosion and changes in water balance, and preparing for the impacts of a changing climate through the effective management of stormwater, including the use of green infrastructure;
- Encouraging education, outreach and stewardship to help support maintaining and improving water quality, as well as water quantity; and
- Encourage the consideration of water conservation and efficiency as part of various municipal programs, standards and projects (including municipal infrastructure and capital projects) and/or as part of new development, where opportunities exist.

## **Open Space**

Provision of and convenient access to open spaces, including parks and trails, and associated recreational opportunities, is an essential part of building complete communities and supporting healthy and active communities.

The existing OP policies with respect to Open Space currently include references to parks and other areas for recreation, stormwater management facilities, areas of natural hazards (flooding) and a number of other open space areas and related considerations. In addition, the policies encourage the incorporation of pedestrian and cycling pathways into proposed and, where feasible, existing development to provide connections to areas of natural heritage/open space and areas of commerce and employment. However, the policies do not currently specifically recognize the various County or Area Municipal studies, goals or objectives with respect to trail development or the role of trails in supporting active transportation.

The current OP policies also include requirements for park/leisure planning within the Large Urban Centres (i.e. Woodstock, Tillsonburg and Ingersoll) and rural settlement areas. These policies would also benefit from review to ensure they will continue to work collaboratively with any updates to the open space policies and provide sufficient direction regarding the implementation of the park planning requirements under the Planning Act.

Following is a summary of the potential updates to this OP policy framework that are currently being suggested for consideration:

- Providing greater direction on encouraging the use of master planning and secondary planning for parks, in part to respond to changes resulting from Bill 23;
- Reviewing and, where necessary, updating the uses permitted in the open space designation;
- Providing greater emphasis on the role of and planning for trails, including recognition of County and Area Municipal standards and studies and the role of trails as part of the active transportation network;
- Greater recognition of opportunities to address food security, such as encouraging urban agriculture and community gardens, where appropriate and opportunities exist;
- Address the minimum requirements of the PPS to promote healthy, active communities by:
  - planning public streets, spaces and facilities to be safe, meet the needs of pedestrians, foster social interaction and facilitate active transportation and community connectivity,
  - planning and providing 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;
  - providing opportunities for public access to shorelines; and
  - recognizing provincial parks, conservation reserves, and other protected areas, and minimizing negative impacts on these areas.

## **Soils**

Healthy soil provides many economic and environmental benefits including, but not limited to, improved crop growth, yield and quality, water and nutrient retention and biodiversity. The current OP policies would benefit from review and update to ensure they continue to focus on and promote healthy soils and soil management and integrate relevant legislative changes (e.g. excess soils), best management practices and stewardship opportunities (e.g. support for the clean water program, federal cover crop programs and similar initiatives).

The existing OP policies recognize the prevalence of high-quality soils within the County and speak to the importance of protecting soils and the removal of topsoil and peat extraction. Potential updates to the existing soils policies would focus primarily on reflecting recent Provincial legislative changes with respect to managing excess soil. Excess soils are those that are not required at an individual construction or development site and must be moved to a new location.

### **Natural Hazards**

To ensure the safety of residents and property, as well as the environment, it is important to identify areas that may be at greater risk of unacceptable health and safety risks, particularly those that may be caused or aggravated by extreme weather events and changing weather patterns. This includes lands that are, or may be, impacted by:

- flooding
- erosion hazards, including areas of steep slopes
- unstable soils and bedrock
- hazardous forest types for wildland fire

Generally, the PPS requires that development be directed away from areas of natural hazards where there is an unacceptable risk to public health or safety or of property damage, and not create new or aggravate existing hazards. It includes some limited provisions to permit development and/or site alteration where appropriate mitigation/risk reduction can be achieved. Further, the PPS requires that municipalities prepare for the impacts of a changing climate that may further increase the risk associated with natural hazards.

The primary focus of the updates to the OP natural heritage policies will be on ensuring that mapping (where applicable) and associated policies are up to date and reflect Provincial requirements. However, it is suggested that potential revisions to better align with Conservation Authority processes and regulations and integrate local planning considerations also be considered, where appropriate.

Following is a summary of the potential policy updates being suggested for consideration in this regard, generally building on the existing OP policy framework:

- Updating policies for natural hazards to ensure development continues to be directed away from areas of natural hazards, where there is an unacceptable risk to public health or safety or of property damage, and not create new or aggravate existing hazards, by:
  - Incorporating updates to reflect the Conservation Authorities Act and Provincial standards for hazardous forest types;
  - Establishing new policies and mapping which address areas of unstable bedrock, building from the existing policy framework for unstable soils;
  - Prohibit certain sensitive land uses from locating within areas of natural hazards where risks are not mitigatable or sites are unsuitable, as required by the PPS (i.e. institutional and emergency service uses); and
  - Encourage the County and Area Municipalities to consider climate impacts and implications for municipal facilities located in areas of natural hazards (e.g. flood prone areas), including potential opportunities to mitigate risks as part of ongoing maintenance or other capital works.

## **Energy Efficiency, Air Quality and Climate Change**

Climate change can result in more frequent and intense storm and weather events (including heat and drought), increased pressure on water resources, and increased impacts (e.g. damages resulting from heat, wind, ice, flooding, and fire) and health effects from extreme heat. Mitigating and adapting to the impacts of a changing climate requires a coordinated approach that considers ways to reduce and cease net carbon emissions, protect and restore carbon stores (e.g. natural heritage features), sequester greenhouse gases (e.g. carbon dioxide) including through the use of green infrastructure, and mitigate and reduce the risks and impacts from extreme weather events.

Land use planning is one important tool for addressing climate change. Planning in advance for long-term, sustainable growth is critical, since decisions about how communities grow and are serviced can have implications for many years to come, as it directly influences the amount of carbon generated from people living, working, and travelling in those communities.

Some examples of land use and infrastructure planning approaches that can improve energy conservation, promote carbon neutrality, and generally support more efficient and sustainable communities include:

- Increasing densities and promoting compact urban form, mix of uses (e.g. residential, employment and recreation/open space) and efficient design and building orientation to:
  - reduce the costs of transportation, improve walkability, more efficiently use of hard and soft services, improve energy conservation, promote net zero development, and reduce development pressure on surrounding agricultural and environmental features;
  - reduce the production and release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases as part of the development process; and
  - minimize the negative impacts from development on air, water and other natural resources.
- Encouraging best management practices for building and infrastructure construction that reduce waste generated and greenhouse gas emissions and increase the use of recycled material;
- Encouraging the development of 'green development standards' to support sustainable building and community design and provide a consistent evaluation framework for assessing the sustainability of development proposals; and
- Supporting and encouraging increased renewable energy generation, energy efficiency, carbon neutrality, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions (e.g. by encouraging businesses and homeowners to participate in programs that incentivize investment in energy and resource efficient technologies).

Following is a summary of some of the potential updates to the OP energy efficiency and air quality policies that are currently being suggested for consideration, including the addition of a more climate focused policy lens:

- Supporting energy conservation and efficiency, improved air quality, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and preparing for the impacts of a changing climate by:
  - Promoting compact built form and increased density and intensification;
  - Supporting the development of compact, transit-supportive, walkable communities through the use of active transportation and transit in and between residential, employment (including commercial and industrial) and institutional uses and other areas;

- Encouraging transit-supportive development and intensification and improve the mix of employment and housing uses to shorten/lessen commuting times and decrease transportation congestion, and,
- Promoting design and orientation which maximizes energy efficiency and conservation, and considers the mitigating effects of vegetation and green infrastructure;
- Provide planning direction for battery storage facilities, including how integration/coordination with other related non-planning requirements would be achieved, taking into consideration any related changes to the PPS that may result from the current Provincial review;
- Encourage increased vegetative cover within settlements to increase passive cooling, reduce urban heat island impacts, and improve air quality;
- Establish policies to encourage the development of 'green development standards' to support incorporation of sustainable building and community design and provide a consistent evaluation framework for assessing the sustainability of development proposals;
- Encourage the Area Municipalities to explore the potential implementation of other sustainability tools and develop related standards (e.g. green roof by-laws, bird-friendly building standards, etc.);
- Recognize and support the implementation of the Oxford Renewable Energy Action Plan and the County's Energy Management and Green Fleet Plans as approved corporate and community plans intended to assist in achievement of 100% renewable energy goals; and,
- Facilitate and plan for renewable and other forms of energy generation (e.g. solar, biogas, battery storage facilities) at appropriate locations and scales with applicable and appropriate land use planning tools and direction.

### Next Steps

Staff are proposing to initiate further community engagement following the October 25, 2023, meeting of County Council, and have it run through until mid December 2023, in order to obtain community input and feedback on the suggested directions for updating the OP. This engagement process is currently proposed to include:

- Notifications via email to required agencies and others who have requested notice or have specific interest;
- Follow up and further discussions with First Nations for additional input into the environmental policies;
- A public open house to provide an opportunity to learn more about the suggested policy directions and ask questions;
- Online engagement opportunities (i.e. Speak Up Oxford), including the ability to review related information and materials and submit comments and feedback;
- Meetings with Area Municipal staff and Councils;
- Meeting with County Agricultural and Planning Advisory Committee (APAC), and with local committees or groups (e.g. Woodstock EAC) where requested by the Area Municipality; and,
- Any other consultation and engagement opportunities that may be identified as being beneficial through the review process.

There is also the opportunity to submit comments to the County Planning office via regular mail and email ([opupdate@oxfordcounty.ca](mailto:opupdate@oxfordcounty.ca)) and to engage online through [Speak Up Oxford](#) (the online survey will be available until mid-December 2023).

Following the above noted consultation and engagement process and consideration of the feedback received, planning staff will prepare and release a draft set of proposed environmental



OP policies and associated mapping (where applicable) for further consultation and Council consideration. Figure 2 below shows the anticipated milestones and current proposed timing for advancing policies for adoption by County Council.



Figure 2. Milestones for Environmental Policy Updates

Unlike other Official Plan amendments for which the County is the approval authority, the Province is the approval authority for any amendments undertaken as part of a comprehensive OP review process. As such, any proposed amendments to the environmental policies that are ultimately adopted by County Council as part of this process, will still be subject to subsequent Provincial review and approval. As part of their approval, the Province has the authority to impose any modifications to the County’s adopted policies that it determines to be necessary to ensure they are consistent with Provincial legislation and policies. However, one of the benefits is that such policies would not then be subject to appeal.

In an effort to try to advance the Provincial review and approval process, staff have already been in contact with Provincial staff regarding the proposed OP review process, and will be following up to determine if there is any clarification and/or updates with respect to the on-going PPS review and related technical questions. As a future next step, a proposed draft of the environmental policies will also be circulated to the Province for initial feedback, as required under the Planning Act.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this report is to present Council with the Suggested Environmental Policy Directions paper and background technical studies (i.e. ONHSS) that are intended to form the

general basis for broader community discussion and input to help inform the development of draft policies for the second phase of the County's broader Official Plan review process.

The primary purpose of the proposed updates to the environmental policies is to ensure they are consistent with current Provincial legislation, plans, policies, and guidelines, as required by the Planning Act. However, this process will also provide an opportunity to improve the overall intent, clarity and implementation of the policies and ensure they continue to reflect local planning goals and objectives.

Pending Council's approval this report, staff will proceed with the next steps in the process (as set out in this report) to obtain community and stakeholder input on the suggested directions for the development of proposed updates to the County's environmental policies.

## **SIGNATURES**

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### **Report Author:**

Original signed by \_\_\_\_\_  
April Nix  
Development Planner – Policy Focus

### **Report Author:**

Original signed by \_\_\_\_\_  
Paul Michiels  
Manager of Planning Policy

### **Departmental Approval:**

Original signed by \_\_\_\_\_  
Gordon K. Hough  
Director of Community Planning

### **Approved for submission:**

Original signed by

Original signed by \_\_\_\_\_  
Benjamin R. Addley  
Chief Administrative Officer

## **ATTACHMENTS**

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Attachment 1 - Suggested Environmental Policy Directions, October 25, 2023

<https://webresources.oxfordcounty.ca/Documents/Council/Attachments/Attachment%201%20Suggested%20Policy%20Directions%20FINAL.pdf>

Attachment 2 - Draft Oxford Natural Heritage Systems Study (ONHSS) 2023, October 25, 2023

<https://webresources.oxfordcounty.ca/Documents/Council/Attachments/Attachment%202%20ONHSS%202023%20Report%20Final%20Draft.pdf>

Attachment 3 - ONHSS Recommendations Summary, October 25, 2023