



New Official Plan should embrace Peterborough's natural assets

By JENNY GLEESON, Special to the Examiner
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SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER Jackson Creek and the old growth forest that lines its banks, seen in this Reimagine Peterborough photo, are a popular destination for Peterborough walkers, hikers and cyclists.

The City of Peterborough is developing a new Official Plan, a central document which sets the vision and direction that shapes the development of the city and its natural spaces to the year 2041.

If you were to look at a financial ledger that included nature, you'd find the Peterborough area rich with assets including a wealth of lakes, rivers, forests, wetlands, wildlife and unique geologic features such as drumlins.

In planning-speak, all of these assets are known as "natural heritage." As we plan Peterborough for the future, the state of our natural heritage will make or break our quality of life.

These natural assets provide us with a clean and reliable supply of water; help to control floods and drought, reduce costs, and offer many other important ecological services. Public parks, green spaces and active-use trails are also highly valued as part of our city. They help us connect with nature, give us a chance to exercise and relieve stress, reduce crime, and nurture our children's skills by exploring the natural world.

Southern Ontario was once a lush, largely natural landscape of Indigenous traditional territory, but now is dominated by vast road networks, large cities, one-crop agriculture, and industrial and commercial activities. We know that there are great demands on lands and waters locally. In the Peterborough ecodistrict (spanning from Peterborough to Belleville), between 1990 and 2010, close to 11 square kilometres of wetland area has been lost - representing an astonishing 10 per cent of wetland loss in Ontario at that time.

Our City's Official Plan is now under a major review and provides a once-in-a-generation chance to shape the future of both our built and natural environments. If done well, Official Plans recognize the inter-relationship between nature and built development, and integrate natural heritage systems as a core piece that supports other land use planning and more livable landscapes.

So what is a "natural heritage system" (NHS), anyway? An NHS is made up of natural assets including woodlands, rivers and wetlands, and connections that help nature to work the way it's supposed to. An NHS includes natural spaces like public parks, shorelines and other lands, including private lands that the owner has restored. Most importantly, an NHS recognizes that protecting just one natural asset in isolation doesn't work (and why it's called a 'system').

Safeguarding our natural assets is so important that the province has published a guide for municipalities to plan their local natural heritage systems. And Peterborough itself produced the Vision 2025 report that celebrates trails and open space areas. It also says there is a need for more natural linkages and improved parkland in more than two dozen of our neighbourhoods.

Natural heritage is included in Peterborough's existing Official Plan; it's based on the [1996 Peterborough Natural Areas Study](#). More than 20 years later, however, limited progress has been made to advance it, and maps and policies are either incomplete or could work better.

Contentious proposals like the Parkway extension, development at Harper Creek, and putting subdivisions near wetlands continue to challenge the priority and value placed by the public on natural heritage in our city. How would we approach these challenges if we better prioritized and framed the inter-relationship between the natural and built environments? At a minimum, it would reduce controversies, improve natural heritage protection, speed up developers' timelines, and save costs for all involved.

The development of the new Official Plan is an opportunity to identify, enhance and restore Peterborough's [natural heritage system](#). Luckily for us, a lot of important work has already been done locally, and we have many knowledgeable people and agencies in town. For example, in 2013, the Kawarthas' Naturally Connected Natural Heritage System was developed by community leaders, groups and agencies, and in line with new provincial directions. The mapped system is designed to foster a connected system of natural areas and linkages covering, the City of Peterborough, Peterborough County and the City of Kawartha Lakes.

Municipalities and other organizations like conservation authorities are being encouraged to use these tools for conservation and land planning. Organizations such as Kawartha Land Trust and others are also actively seeking to acquire and care for properties to help create and support the system.

The connectivity of Peterborough's urban green space within the city and to the broader Kawarthas' NHS must be protected in the Official Plan.

And, an updated inventory and evaluation of natural, wildlife, water and linkage areas in the city is needed to build on the 1996 Peterborough Natural Areas Study. [Best practices](#) from other municipalities are well documented and can be adopted here. This might include reinstating an environmental advisory committee. With this information and insights, the city can more effectively integrate natural heritage systems as the foundation for the growth, densities and land use planning aspects of the Official Plan.

This is no easy task, but the state of our natural heritage must be prioritized if Peterborough is to have a vibrant, prosperous and resilient future.

Jenny Gleeson is a member of Reimagine Peterborough. This is the 12th in a series of columns from Reimagine Peterborough, a citizen-led movement that sees better urban planning and public engagement as essential to our social, cultural, democratic, and

quality of life needs. For updates and a Toolkit to help groups contribute to the Official Plan, follow Reimagine Peterborough on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), at reimagineptbo.ca, and [join our mailing list](#).