

Clause No. 11 in Report No. 4 of Committee of the Whole was adopted, without amendment, by the Council of The Regional Municipality of York at its meeting held on February 20, 2014.

## **11**

### **ENHANCING PUBLIC USES OF THE YORK REGIONAL FOREST**

**Committee of the Whole recommends adoption of the following recommendation contained in the report dated January 30, 2014 from the Commissioner of Environmental Services:**

#### **1. RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that:

1. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of the local municipalities.

#### **2. PURPOSE**

This report provides an update on two enhancements to York Regional Forest properties; (i) improving trail accessibility for persons with disabilities, and (ii) a pilot project for new dog off leash area for residents who own dogs.

#### **3. BACKGROUND**

**The York Regional Forest was established by York County in 1924 to restore degraded agricultural lands to forest habitats**

York Region owns and manages 2,300 hectares of York Regional Forest. The Regional Forest consists of 21 properties and includes over 120 kilometres of recreation trails. The properties have been owned by the Region for many years, with some acquired in the early 1920's. The lands were originally acquired for reforestation and forest management purposes. In 1998 Regional Council adopted the York Regional Forest 20 Year Forest Management Plan 1998 - 2018.

The York Regional Forest also serves a variety of other purposes including a location to demonstrate environmental protection, and sustainable forest management, as well as providing a nature setting for the Region's public environmental education programs and

encourage physical and healthy lifestyles. The York Regional Forest was the first public forest in Canada to be Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified as responsibly managed. The Forest Stewardship Council is an independent, non-governmental, not-for-profit organization established to promote responsible management of the world's forests.

### **Recreational use of the York Regional Forest is diverse**

The York Regional Forest provides for a broad range of public recreational opportunities including hiking/walking, dog walking, horseback riding, cycling, cross-country skiing and nature appreciation. Dog walking and hiking account for almost 60 percent of the public recreational use.

## **4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS**

### **4.1 ACCESSIBLE TRAIL INITIATIVES**

#### **In 2010 York Region's first accessible trail was constructed at the Hollidge Tract**

York Region has a strong commitment to making our services, facilities and programs more accessible for our residents and visitors who have disabilities. This commitment includes the trails and services provided in the York Regional Forest. To improve accessibility of the forest, a one kilometre accessible trail was constructed in the Hollidge Tract in 2010. The accessible trail was designed and constructed in accordance with the *Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act* draft Built Environment Standard. This trail has been very successful, and its design and construction is recognized as a best practice for accessible trails across Ontario.

#### **New design guidelines consistent with legislation have been developed for the construction of accessible nature trails in the York Regional Forest**

The *Accessibility of Ontarians with Disabilities Act* through its Integrated Accessibility Standard has set the minimum requirements for accessible trails. The standard identifies requirements for slopes, trail widths and signage. In 2013 a set of design guidelines were developed for accessible trails in the York Regional Forest. The Accessibility Design Guidelines for York Regional Forest trails meet or exceed the minimum standard set in the Integrated Accessibility Standard and address items not defined in the standard and the multi-use nature of Regional Forest trails. The guidelines were developed with input from the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee.

### **In 2014 two kilometres of accessible trail will be constructed in the North Tract of the York Regional Forest**

Applying the 2013 Accessibility Design Guidelines for the York Regional Forest trails, nine kilometres of accessible trail have been identified in the North, Hollidge, Eldred King Woodlands and Hall Tracts. Locations were selected based on proximity to urban centres and specific trail routes or areas which minimize environmental impact and construction cost, while ultimately providing a positive user experience. Detailed design work has been completed for all nine kilometres of accessible trail.

In 2014, two kilometres of accessible trail will be constructed in the North Tract, Whitchurch-Stouffville, including a 500 metre and 1500 metre loop, accessible parking and signage (*Attachment 1*). The remaining seven kilometres of accessible trail will be constructed in subsequent years as part of the York Regional Forest capital plan.

### **4.2 YORK REGIONAL FOREST DOG OFF LEASH AREA PILOT PROJECT**

#### **Environmental Services Committee requested staff to investigate opportunities for a dog off leash area in the Regional Forest**

The Regional Forest has been a popular destination for dog walkers for many years. Forest trails offer an opportunity for short and long walks, with dogs on or, on occasion, off leash. The Regional Forest is not a dog off leash area; dogs must be on leash or in control at all times. It is a common practice that dog walkers on trails must leash their dogs when approaching other users.

At its meeting on February 8, 2012, Environmental Services Committee requested staff investigate opportunities for the consideration of a pilot dog off leash area in the York Regional Forest. A designated area would allow owners to have their dogs off leash within a fenced enclosure. These enclosures are recognized as value added public amenities which provide dogs with an environment for off leash exercise and allow for important socialization opportunities with other dogs. It also offers an opportunity for dog owners to gather and socialize, creating a sense of community.

#### **Dog off leash parks more prevalent in local municipalities**

In York Region and across southern Ontario, fenced in dog off leash areas are more prevalent in local municipalities and easier to market, maintain and operate. Many dog off leash parks exist in local municipalities. At present there are seven dog off leash parks across six municipalities in York Region. Dog off leash parks are often situated near urban areas close to natural areas.

### **Research and focussed public engagement helped inform the options, location and design of a dog off leash area**

In 2012, staff engaged existing forest users through a Regional Forest survey (217 respondents), and public input was also provided through the Regional Forest Advisory Team which includes representation from a cross section of recreational forest users. An assessment of existing municipal dog off leash areas was completed, including background research on types of facilities and design options. Municipalities and local Conservation Authorities which had dog off leash areas were consulted in terms of design, operation, maintenance and rules. Options for dog off leash areas included designated dog off leash trails and fenced in enclosures.

The Regional Forest pilot will enable an assessment of this type of facility as part of the York Regional Forest and how it may serve as more of a destination opportunity within the Region rather than a local neighbourhood amenity for our residents.

### **Public feedback used to confirm the location and design of the dog off leash area**

Public feedback from the 2012 survey was split on the need for a dog off leash area given the status quo seemed to meet existing expectations. Local Municipal and Conservation Authority feedback identified an increasing demand for these types of areas, and they often reduce environmental impact associated with dogs running off leash in sensitive natural areas. Other factors which were considered in the location and design of the dog off leash area included:

- Proximity to urban areas
- Minimize environmental impact (e.g. vegetation and trees)
- Appropriate grades and drainage
- Aesthetically attractive and interesting
- Availability of parking
- Ease of operational access

Based on the assessment, the Bendor and Graves Tract in East Gwillimbury was selected for the location of a fenced in dog off leash area as a demonstration project (*Attachment 2*).

### **One hectare fenced dog off leash area was constructed in fall 2013 in the Bendor and Graves Tract, to be opened in spring 2014**

A consultant with experience in dog off leash areas was retained for the design of the facility in the summer of 2013. Construction commenced in fall 2013. The final signage and tree planting will be implemented in early 2014. It is anticipated that the dog off leash demonstration area will be opened for public use in spring 2014.

The one hectare demonstration area includes fencing, two double gated entrances, tree planting, benches, signage and is adjacent to the parking lot (*Attachment 3*). Risk and Legal staff were consulted in the scoping of rules for the area which will be posted on site. Waste receptacles will be situated at both entrances to the fenced off area, and the volume of dog waste material will be monitored with the use of the area.

The dog off leash pilot project will be monitored throughout 2014 to assess level of use and operation of the facility. Results will be used to implement improvements to the current area and inform the consideration of any future dog off leash areas in the York Regional Forest.

### **Link to key Council-approved plans**

Development of accessible trails and a dog off leash demonstration area in the York Regional Forest assist in achieving the goals in Vision 2051, specifically:

- A Place Where Everyone Can Thrive – An Accessible Region
- Liveable Cities and Complete Communities – A Living City

These initiatives support implementation of the 2011 to 2015 Strategic Plan including addressing the following indicator of success:

- Progress of meeting the Integrated Standards under the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **Funding for both projects was approved as part of the 2013 and 2014 capital budgets**

Development of Accessibility Design Guidelines for York Regional Forest trails (\$80,000) and the design and construction of the dog off leash demonstration area (\$50,000) were funded within the approved 2013 capital budget. Operational costs will be monitored as part of the overall demonstration project assessment. Construction of the new two kilometres of accessible trail in the North Tract is estimated to cost \$200,000 and will be funded within the existing York Regional Forest 2014 approved capital budget.

## **6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT**

Local municipal staff from the Towns of Newmarket, East Gwillimbury and Whitchurch-Stouffville support these initiatives. Construction of accessible trails and the dog off leash demonstration area will provide value added outdoor recreational opportunities for local residents, including those with disabilities.

Design guidelines and development of accessible trails in the York Regional Forest will help provide information and a demonstration location, for municipalities advancing accessible trails and facilities in local parks. Copies of this report and design guidelines will be forwarded to local municipalities for information.

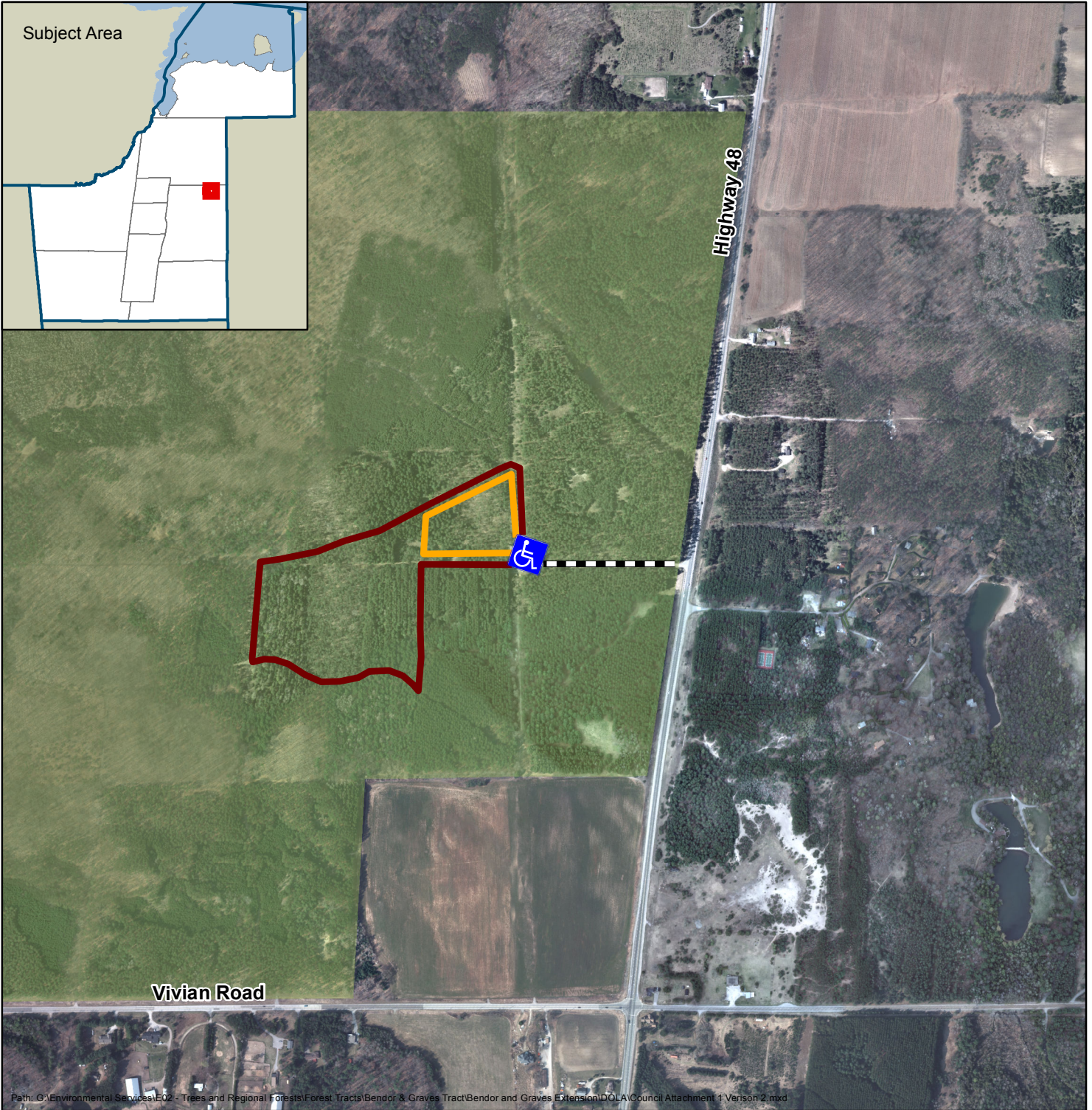
## **7. CONCLUSION**

Development of guidelines and construction of accessible trails in the York Regional Forest will reduce barriers and improve access for persons with disabilities. The Accessibility Design Guidelines for York Regional Forest Trails are recognized as a provincial best practice for accessible trails and demonstrates the Region's leadership in accessibility. With accessible trails and the construction of a dog off leash demonstration area, York Region is providing additional outdoor recreation opportunities for residents. These initiatives are consistent with the York Regional Forest management plan and respond to the needs of our residents.

For more information on this report, please contact Laura McDowell, Director, Environmental Promotion and Protection at 905-830-4444 Ext. 75077 or Ian Buchanan, Manager of Natural Heritage and Forestry at 905-830-4444 Ext. 75204.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.<sup>3</sup>

*Attachments (3)*



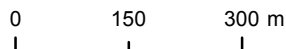
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## York Regional Forest - North Tract Accessible Trail

Enhancing Public Uses of the York Regional Forest, February 13, 2014

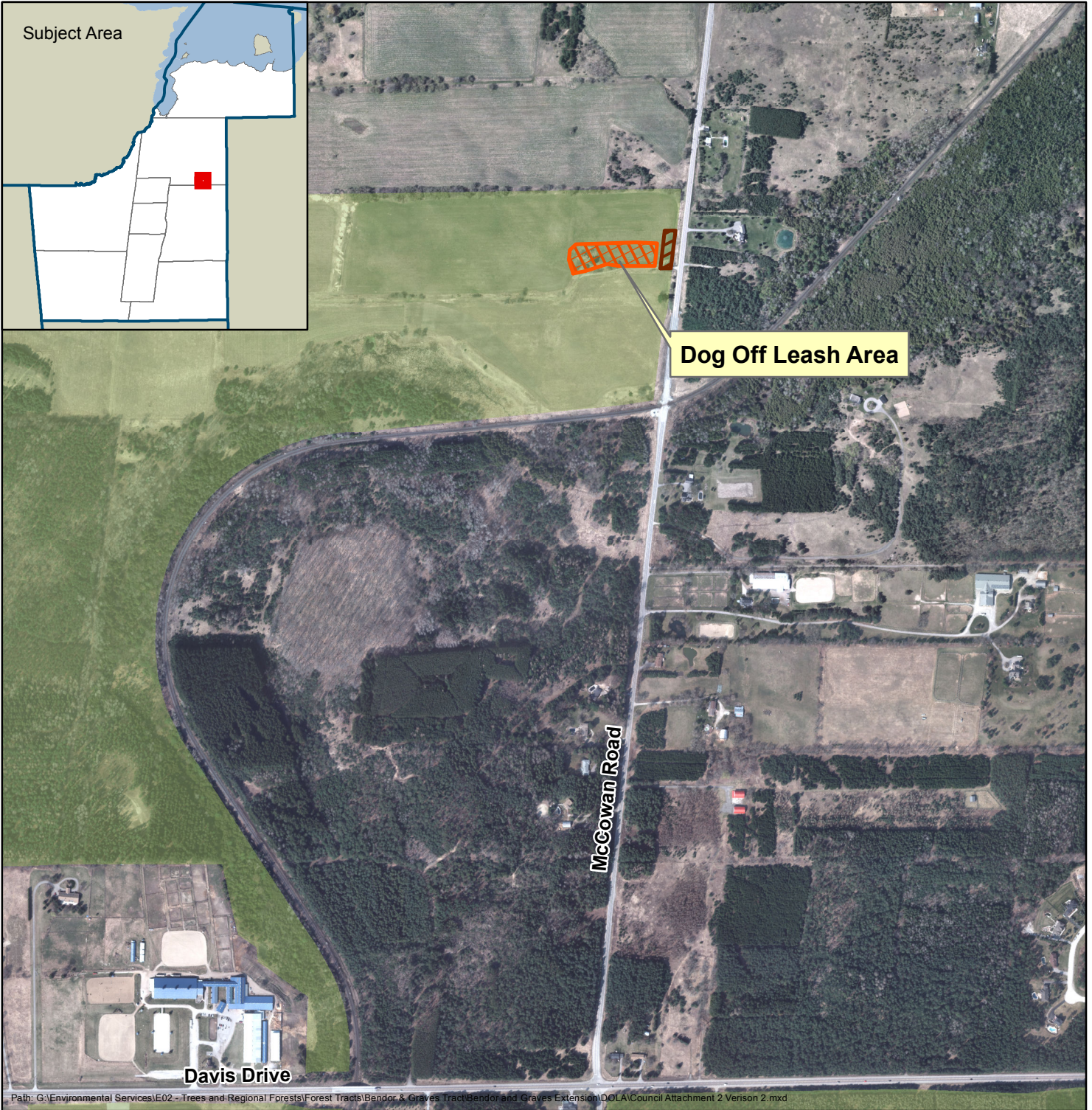


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### Legend

- Regional Forest
- 1500 m Accessible Trail
- 500 m Accessible Trail
- ♿ Accessible Parking
- Road Entranceway



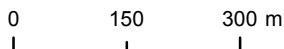
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# York Regional Forest - Bendor and Graves Tract Dog Off Leash Area




Enhancing Public Uses of the York Regional Forest, February 13, 2014



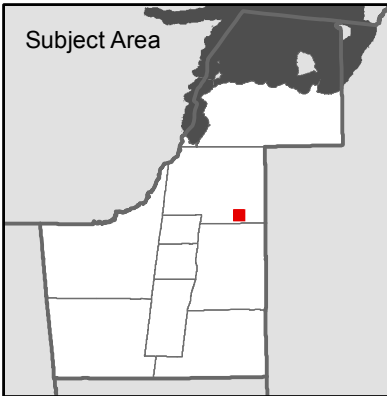
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## Legend

-  Regional Forest
-  Dog Off Leash Area
-  Parking Area





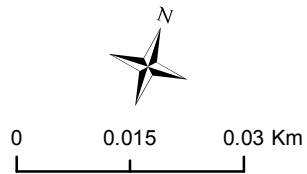
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## York Regional Forest - Bendor and Graves Tract Dog Off Leash Area Site Plan







Enhancing Public Uses of the York Regional Forest, February 13, 2014



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### Legend

- |   |                          |   |                      |
|---|--------------------------|---|----------------------|
|  | Parking Lot              |  | Double Gate Entrance |
|  | Dog Off Leash Area Fence |  | Trees                |
|  | Limestone Screening Path |  | Log Benches          |