DON WATERSHED REGENERATION COUNCIL

October 29, 2007

BY FAX 416- 978-6701, HARD COPY TO FOLLOW

Ms. Catherine Riggall
Vice President, Business Affairs
University of Toronto
27 King's College Circle
Toronto, ON
M5S 1A1

Dear Ms. Riggall:

Re: DAVID DUNLAP OBSERVATORY PROPERTY
TOWN OF RICHMOND HILL

The Don Watershed Regeneration Council (DWRC) (see history and goals enclosed) understands that the University of Toronto is planning to declare the David Dunlap Observatory and surrounding lands as surplus and intends to sell the property. We understand that the extensive urban development which has taken place around the Observatory, and the resulting light pollution, has rendered this location less-than-ideal for observing the night sky.

The David Dunlap Observatory property is situated on the northeast edge of the Don River's German Mills subwatershed. German Mills Creek runs approximately 300 metres to the west of the Observatory property. The site is of historic significance to the Town of Richmond Hill and includes a pre-confederation house that belonged to a local family involved in the Upper Canada Rebellion. More recently, in the early 1970s, evidence of the first black hole was discovered at the Observatory by University of Toronto astronomers.

Through analysis undertaken by TRCA Terrestrial Natural Heritage staff using 2002 remote sensing data, the property, which is approximately 73 hectares in size, consists of 69 hectares of natural cover. The existing cover, for the most part, is equally composed of forest, successional habitats and old field meadow (manicured lands not included). The Observatory lands represent 9% of the total natural cover found within the German Mills subwatershed and is included in the draft target system, which is defined as the long-term natural system goal for the Don River watershed. Surveys conducted by TRCA in 2001 found that the site contained some vegetation communities of interest and several species of regional and urban concern. Residents who visit the property regularly report observing deer, fox, coyotes and hawks among other wildlife.

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Although the property as it currently exists:

(a) is land-locked with little or no existing linkages to other terrestrial natural heritage features; and

(b) has limited habitat and species quality and diversity; conditions which are reflective of the influences of the surrounding land uses;

A large patch of undeveloped land with continuous natural cover, such as this property, is a rarity within the urban landscape and should be respected and nurtured.

Due to the size of the site, there is potential for forest interior to be created and for the quality of the existing natural cover to be improved using a targeted approach to habitat enhancement and protection. Enhancing the property's natural habitat features would help to mitigate the impacts of climate change globally; and locally, would help to temper the effects of rising temperatures in the surrounding community. In addition, it would increase species biodiversity on the site, not to mention the intrinsic aesthetic value that an urban park possesses.

One key area that might be targeted for regeneration and enhancement is the south-eastern corner of the site. The majority of the vulnerable flora species found on the Observatory lands is located in this particular area. There is also potential to connect the Observatory lands to German Mills Creek via the rail corridor running along the west side of the site; thereby, integrating the site into the existing natural system network.

It is likely that the existing natural cover on the Observatory lands provides key stop-over areas for migratory birds heading north or south in the spring and fall seasons, and acts as a stepping stone for the east-west movement of birds between the neighboring Rouge and Don watershed ravine systems. From a migratory bird perspective, enhancing the existing system would make the site even more appealing as an interim stopping ground.

Any change in the site's current land use could potentially alter the natural hydrologic cycle. Activities that would increase the amount of impermeable surfaces on the property would reduce the infiltration capacity of the site which, in turn, would generate greater surface runoff and higher, more frequent flows in nearby German Mills Creek. This could lead to downstream erosion and reduced baseflow in the river as well as impaired water quality. In addition, a naturally occurring spring feature on the Observatory lands verifies that the property is located in a known high groundwater area.

It is worth noting that when public consultation was held in support of the original watershed plan *Forty Steps to a New Don* back in the mid-1990s, residents of Richmond Hill pointed out that the Observatory lands were among several local areas that warranted evaluation and protection.

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The DWRC recommends that the University of Toronto form a partnership with Environment Canada acting on behalf of the Federal Government, the Province of Ontario, the Regional Municipality of York in concert with the Town of Richmond Hill and urges swift action to set aside the Observatory lands to help increase the amount of critically needed natural cover within the rapidly developing and extensively urbanized headwater areas of the Don watershed. We also recommend that the Town of Richmond Hill designate the Observatory and any other key landmarks on the site as heritage buildings, and use this as an opportunity for further educational and interpretative activities.

Members of the DWRC request notification of any decisions made regarding the property and any future opportunities for further comment and/or involvement.

Sincerely,

< original signed by>

Phil Goodwin, Chair
Don Watershed Regeneration Council

Encl.

cc: Bryon Wilfert, MP, Richmond Hill
Reza Moridi, MPP, Richmond Hill
David Caplan, MPP, Minister of Public Infrastructure Renewal
Mary Anne Yake, President, Richmond Hill Naturalists
Gord Weeden, Chair, Rouge Park Alliance
Brian Denney, Chief Administrative Officer, TRCA
Adele Freeman, Director, Watershed Management, TRCA
Deborah Martin-Downs, Director, Ecology, TRCA

DISTRIBUTION LIST:
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John Baird, MP, Minister of the Environment
Dalton McGuinty, MPP, Premier of Ontario
Bill Fisch, Regional Chair and CEO, Regional Municipality of York
David Barrow, Mayor, Town of Richmond Hill

Don Watershed Regeneration Council

The Don Watershed Regeneration Council (DWRC) is a volunteer, watershed–wide advisory committee established by Toronto and Region Conservation (TRCA) in 1994 to help restore the Don River watershed to a healthy, sustainable natural environment. The DWRC is a sub-committee of the TRCA's Watershed Management Advisory Board. The Council is composed of community members, elected officials and representatives from agencies, businesses, environmental non-governmental organizations and academic institutions located within or concerned with the future of the watershed.

A comprehensive strategy – Forty Steps to a New Don – was completed in 1994 and, through the efforts of thousands of volunteers and in partnership with municipalities and environmental groups, we are achieving progress towards the goals of the strategy. Three major principles guide us:

1. *protect what is healthy,*
2. *regenerate what is degraded; and*
3. *take responsibility for the Don.*

A new, updated Don Watershed Plan is in preparation which will reflect broader watershed issues of sustainability including water and energy efficiency and emerging challenges such as climate change.

As well as advising TRCA, the DWRC provides comments to other government agencies (federal, provincial and municipal) on matters pertaining to the interests and activities of the environmental nongovernmental organizations which are members of the Council. The enclosed comments are the views of the DWRC and are not necessarily the views of TRCA.

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