

Aurora's nature has \$7 million annual value: Report

By Brock Weir

Few would dispute the value trees and green space bring to the community.

They're widely held as the 'lungs' of a busy, urbanised community, vital habitats for animals and places for people to relax and unwind.

But however valuable these spaces are, advocates now have the dollars and cents figures to back them up.

According to a report compiled by the Town of Aurora, the area's forests, parks and wetlands are estimated to bring \$7.4 million annual value in terms of the services they provide.

'This is a significant value attributed to the protection of environmental features, reduction in greenhouse gases, and other ecological benefits,' said Jim Kyle in a report to Council.

'Protection and investing in natural capital assets along with the implementation of low impact development standards can yield significant overall economic benefits to the Town of Aurora. Residents rely on nature to sustain and improve the quality of life enjoyed today and into the future or, put another way, preserving and enhancing natural capital assets will benefit Aurorans now and for generations to come.'

While the report had been previously debated by the Town's economic development committee, Councillors decided last week to delay accepting the report until other advisory committees had a chance to look at it. Although formal acceptance has been delayed, they expressed support not just for its contents, but that there was now something concrete available for natural assets.

'I think it is a very exciting report,' said Councillor Chris Ballard. 'When one asks what the purpose is of a report like this, in my mind it is very simple. We attach an economic value to every decision we make around this table, whether it is buying a truck or selling a piece of property. This is a very complex process and it simplifies decision-making because it attaches an economic value to our natural assets and [will] allow us to more easily justify decisions future Councils will be making having this information at their fingertips.'

Speaking in support of the document, Councillor Paul Pirri said one question he had was whether it would help determine how much money it would cost the municipality to 'start from scratch' if these assets weren't already in place and, if establishing these natural assets were not possible, measures that could be taken to have the same benefits.

One example Mr. Kyle provided in response was a case in a New York State watershed. New York City, he said, examined the costs of installing a complex water filtration system that would cost up to \$8 million to build and a further \$300 million in annual operations costs. One way to get around that was to look at natural systems in place, such as marshes, that would do the same thing. That would have cost as much as \$1.5 million to protect the land to do the job with very minimal operations costs.

'The same can be done here with this report,' said Mr. Kyle. 'It looks at other ways to enhance what is already there and what is the best bang for your buck. It takes what we already have and puts a number behind it.'

One Councillor less enthusiastic about the report was Evelyn Buck. She said she believed the value of natural assets was clear, but when it comes to economic value she thinks in terms of dollars and cents, and that comes in is assessment value.

'I would be surprised if anyone in Aurora wasn't already aware of how wealthy they are in terms of their natural assets, being on the Oak Ridges Moraine,' she said. 'I think there might be very few small towns like Aurora that are as well off as we are in terms of natural assets.'