

Wildlife Park's future needs your input, says planner



By Brock Weir

To say Aurora's proposed Urban Nature Reserve, planned for Aurora's east end has been a labour of love for landscape architect David Tomlinson might be something of an understatement.

Mr. Tomlinson has been working on plans for a nature preserve just to the west of new developments in Aurora's 2C Lands for over 15 years. Approved in principle numerous times by each successive Councils, it is likely a project that will need a further approval from the 2014-2018 Council, but Aurora residents will have an opportunity to sound off on the future of the Urban Nature Reserve at an information session slated for Wednesday, October 1, at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

A large swath of land spreading out over 70 hectares dotted with wetlands from the East Holland River watershed and roughly bordered by Mavrinac Boulevard, Leslie Street and St. John's Sideroad, Mr. Tomlinson envisions an area where residents can walk the trails and take in local wildlife, while passing through their terrain almost unnoticed to the birds and beasts which call the land home.

"There has always been support of the park from day one," says Mr. Tomlinson. "Unfortunately, most people in Aurora don't know anything about it, but the ones who do are strong supporters. Everyone who has learned about it normally ends up supporting it, and that is what this meeting is about - increasing public awareness of this really beautiful habitat gem we have here in Aurora."

While it might be a "beautiful habitat gem", it is not all it could be at this particular point in time, according to Mr. Tomlinson, nor is it all it once was.

As development has increased, wildlife population has shifted accordingly. It is something he and his team have been keeping an eye on as they continue their plans.

"We are losing species," he says. "The swallow population has been reduced by about 25 per cent in the last two decades. We have got nest boxes in the nature reserve and we actually have over 1,000 young swallows in there already. We have got to start doing positive things, not just talking about it, but getting things done. This will get things done and preserve a really important chunk of habitat in Aurora - not just preserve it - and increase the number of species using it if we construct it and manage it right."

While the swallows have already taken the group up on their offer of new digs, topping Mr. Tomlinson's priority list is securing trails throughout the area before the 2C Development is complete and people start moving into their new homes.

"If we don't get the trails in, people will wander all over the place which would be devastating," he says. "We need to get six trails

in. If there are no trails when the houses are built, [neighbours] will obviously start taking their dogs for walks and all kinds of things. It is very hard to change that once we decide to do something. If they can wander anywhere they like, it is hard to stop them.?

Once these are installed, however, Mr. Tomlinson says people using the new trails will then be able to view the wildlife safely from duck blinds, unnoticed by the animals.

?Access is confined to very definite trails. You can't wander all over it, but you will be able to view all this wildlife from bird blinds. You get a better view of the wildlife than if you just rush past the birds. Over 20 years, we have monitored the wildlife reserve and we know exactly how many pairs have nested in that reserve every year since 2001. About 16 have vanished as a result of the development going along the edges. A certain number have been reduced, a certain number have increased, some have increased temporarily and have decreased, but we have a complete record of what has happened to the bird population. Now what we have to do is get some of the birds we have lost back by how we manage it and screen it.

?The species that require very specific habitats and conditions have been replaced by species that tolerate what we do. By screening it, it is possible to get some of these lost species back. That is why it should be a designed nature reserve. We're creating new wetlands where the wetlands before weren't being productive, so there is a lot of habitat improvement and habitat creation that we are planning on doing to increase the diversity of habitat.?

The public information session on the Urban Wildlife Park will take place Wednesday, October 1 at 7 p.m. at the Aurora Cultural Centre.