

Conservation Authority warns of ecological harm

The Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority say that the proposed dam and online pond in the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve do not meet policy, advising lawmakers to reconsider development plans that may create ecological harm.

“Based on current information, we believe that the existing wetland is providing a valuable benefit to the ecosystem and removing the marsh to create an additional pond would not constitute in that improvement,” said Ashlea Brown, Director of Development Services for the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation (LSRC) Authority, who discussed the Conservation Authority's policy regarding online ponds as applicable to the proposed Phase 2 works in the Reserve.

“The need for the dam, the net benefit of the proposed work has not been clearly shown. And it's our position that the installation of the control structure would not improve flooding or erosion would not constitute a benefit or gain in ecological value.”

The original proposal by David Tomlinson included utilizing the existing online pond to develop habitat for waterfowl, according to reports.

In the General Committee meeting on March 7, Brown said that the ponds predate the authority's current regulations and that they did not issue approvals for the construction of the dam and online pond.

The two existing downstream ponds are “historic” ponds and dam structures that pre-date current regulations, she said, adding that the preference would be to remove these structures as there would be a net environmental benefit.

“Based on our review, the dam structure will impede the natural flow of water and impact fish habitat as well as water quality. Dams hold back water which can impact flooding and erosion and further increase water temperatures,” she said.

Introducing an online pond will inherently create warmer water temperatures, the report said. “The focus should be on opportunities to decrease water temperatures and improve habitat functions. Restoration of forested riparian corridors along these reaches will improve habitat and wildlife movement through the area and improve hydrologic function.”

Brown said they have conducted a literature review and studies throughout the watershed, however, specific monitoring in the location has not been done yet.

Brown mentioned that the Ecological Integrity Monitoring report supports the marsh habitat and shows that there has been a decrease in temperature in the reach.

“There was also information about the bird species that were existing in using it. And there was potential habitat for threatened species as well as a few different unique species that were highlighted. So, we use that to form our opinion on the value that's being provided by that marsh habitat,” she added.

“The dam structure and pond would require regular maintenance management to ensure it functions properly, and the Authority staff do not support undertaking liability associated with the act of management of a control structure.”

David Tomlinson, former resident, said he supports the Town's General Committee report on the Nature Reserve phase 2 options, however his main concern pertains to the construction of the new industrial bypass ponds.

“Not creating this is not creating a new pond, but repairing the dam and controls of an existing historic pond would be at the expense of marsh habitat,” he said.

From a conservation point of view, the best way to protect habitat diversity from species extinction is to begin at a local level,

Tomlinson said, quoting David Suzuki at a recent international biodiversity conference.

"Aurora is a prime example of the success of this approach, mainly due to efforts by nature, Aurora's citizen scientists, both the Town staff and long-term Council support over a period of 23 years changes to the breeding bird population have been recorded in the nature reserve," he said.

"We have a fine record of protecting and enhancing wildlife in our Town. And the nature reserve is a jewel in the crown. It is very important to recreate the shorebirds scraping [in] its original form?50 per cent of our shorebird population has been lost in the last few decades, mainly due to feeding habitat loss on their migration routes and loss in wintering grounds," Tomlinson said.

When asked by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo about the water temperature's increase and whether the water flow will go to the north or south pond, Tomlinson replied that it normally flows to the south.

"It flows through a Cattail Marsh into the south pond," he said. "The dam would preserve all the spring flow from the snow melt, and then the water flow would start, and the water would slowly evaporate as the pond heated up. Gradually, the mud would be exposed and this was the critical factor in creating the shorebird scrape. So, the only time any water flowed from the shorebird scrape into the salt pond in the summer was when there was a tremendous rainstorm, which refilled the pond and it overflowed the board dam again."

Staff propose that the remainder of the nature reserve be constructed within the currently approved capital budget authority for this project, based upon consultant construction cost estimates, and aim to deliver a completed trails network for resident enjoyment while achieving protection of sensitive natural habitat for wildlife.

Staff will be directed to implement Option 2, including the Phase 2 trail connections, boardwalks, and associated landscaping, and that the offline wetlands and Marsh Creek realignment be deleted from the Phase 2 scope of works.

By Elisa Nguyen