

Environmentalists urge action on untouched grassland by wildlife park

By Brock Weir

In the overall scheme of things, a pocket of land less than two acres in Aurora's planned wildlife park might seem small potatoes, but to environmentalists behind the plan, it will make a world of difference to the critters that call it home.

Landscape architect David Tomlinson, the mind behind Aurora's long-planned wildlife park, tentatively redubbed the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve after the farm that once stood on much of the land, says a small pocket of land in the 70 acre nature preserve was left off the map when plans were finalized, and time is of the essence to right the oversight.

The pocket is adjacent to Aurora's 2B lands, the housing development radiating from the northeast quadrant of Bayview Avenue and Wellington Street East.

'I did my presentation [on the wildlife park] after the B lands were more or less agreed to,' said Mr. Tomlinson, noting the land in question was not built on as developers considered road access from the west to River Ridge Road. 'It's a little thing that slipped through. I always thought it was part of the grassland and I wasn't really worried about it until two years ago [when I was told] it was developable. Because they built everything else and left that, I thought they were finished.'

But why is this pocket important? According to Mr. Tomlinson, it represents 'a cross-section of virtually all the habitats found in Southern Ontario' evergreen woodland, deciduous woodland, ephemeral ponds, coniferous shrub land, large ponds, stormwater ponds, sedge marsh, wetlands and a bit of everything.'

'One of the most important things it has is grassland, which is the hardest thing to secure because grassland is buildable land,' said Mr. Tomlinson. 'Wetland and woodland is not buildable. Grassland is the most threatened habitat in southern Ontario. In the last two decades, we have lost between 10 and 50 per cent of the individual species that inhabit grassland, so grassland is pretty vital.'

'Once those houses are built, that will be it. The effect on the grasslands and the effect on the wetlands will be there for as long as the houses are there. It will really be a disaster. Three Councils worked really hard to secure this grassland and we just have this one missing piece, which we really need. If we do build on it, it is going to have a catastrophic effect on grassland and wetland birds.'

In total, the pocket represents approximately one third of the total grassland area of the nature preserve and is vital to migrating birds like bobolink, which only nest on grassland.

'It is the only 100-year-old grassland we have left in Aurora,' Mr. Tomlinson added.

Mr. Tomlinson took his concerns to Council last week, asking members to consider purchasing the land in question from developers. Although a potential purchase price did not figure into the conversation, Council said they would look at the matter 'seriously' and head out with Mr. Tomlinson to get a look of the land themselves.

'When I see and hear a person like you, very dedicated, fighting for the lands, it really strikes a chord with me,' said Councillor Harold Kim. 'For some people, whether it is \$1 million or \$2 million, it is a cost that is too much for this small parcel of land. But, I know radicals like you' and I say that in the most respectful way 'keep a lot of people in check because we wouldn't have this world without responsible people. People like you allow us too much latitude for our laziness and ineptitude to have the gonads to go forward to stand up.'