

Exploring 'Green Development' standards greenlit at Council table

Aurora could soon place more emphasis on green building standards and protecting the tree canopy when it comes to future development and building.

Council last week tasked staff with reviewing the Official Plan and other municipal policies already in place with an eye of strengthening protective language around green development standards and tree canopy protection.

The decision came through a motion put forward by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said it was a particularly important direction to take in light of climate change.

'Recent events worldwide and in Canada clearly show that climate change is causing disastrous consequences for communities,' said Councillor Gaertner in her motion. 'Adaptation and mitigation are crucial for residents' safety and quality of life. Trees and green infrastructure are critical to mitigate climate change impacts like storms that could cause flooding and tree canopies are important to mitigate the urban heat island effect and to decrease atmospheric carbon through sequestration.'

At the Council table last week, she added, 'I think we take our trees for granted and I think we have to stop doing that because they are so valuable in many aspects of climate change.'

'We just have to look at everything we have in place and make sure it is as good as it can be to protect the trees.'

The Councillor's motion reflected discussions that took place in February at a meeting of Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee.

There, members reviewed a previously-commissioned study of Aurora's natural assets - trees, wetlands, green spaces - which found these spaces contributed a value of \$7.4 million in services to the community each year.

'Without the values of Aurora's natural capital assets, it is possible that the overall budget of the Town could potentially be increased by \$7.4 million, which is a 12.4 per cent increase per year, to replicate or replace the ecosystem services and other benefits that Aurora's Natural Capital Assets provide,' reads the report.

'Protection in investing Natural Capital Assets, along with the implementation of Low Impact Development (LID) standards can yield significant overall economic benefits to the Town of Aurora. These include environmental benefits as well as the significant physical and mental health benefits associated with reduction of greenhouse gases, promotion of active transportation/recreational pursuits, and appreciation of nature.'

The Committee, however, said it was time to take a second look at the report.

'I saw the numbers and I think they are vastly understated if anyone was to look at it now,' said Committee member Colin Brown. 'They are learning more and more about how valuable it is and how irreplaceable it is. I am not quite sure how the dollar value was considered or how it is applied, but it certainly should be updated because the numbers, even with just a cursory look, [is] vastly understated.'

This was a view shared by fellow Committee member Sam Cunningham who said the numbers were not only outdated but did not reflect valuable pieces missing from the overall puzzle.

'It is so outdated,' she said. '[The original report] was so buzzword heavy in terms of 'carbon sequestration, 'it mitigates pollution', but I would love to see actual details because they do so much more than that. Golf courses weren't considered under the broader umbrella [as a natural asset] but the fact they are being presented as contributing to ecosystem services is just off-the-charts crazy to

me because, yes, agriculture does have some carbon but it is not talking about the broader impacts. It mentions that golf courses have negative impacts, but oftentimes the benefits are outweighed by the pollution [like] fertilizer and that is something I would like to see if this paper was updated?

?We get trapped a lot in the world of thinking the natural area preserves itself in its own area and that it is immune to the development around it. That is crazy untrue. If you develop around a wetland, the wetland decreases exponentially in terms of its ecosystem services. I love that we're talking about this, but there are a couple of key details in the [report] that are huge red flags to me.?

Cunningham said any revised plan should provide a ?baseline? on the ecological health of the natural resources in question while also highlighting the value of these natural assets ?as they stand.?

Back at the Council table last week, Councillor Michael Thompson questioned whether reviewing green policies has been part of the Town's ongoing review of its new Official Plan.

?We certainly have been looking at various green policies and our standards in Town,? he said, directing his statement to Director of Building Marco Ramunno. ?Can I make the assumption that we're already considering providing some strengthening, considering this Council took the position of declaring a Climate Emergency and so forth?

?I think it is great that we're highlighting that in this motion [but] I would expect that staff were already doing this to some degree.?

Mr. Ramunno said that was a ?fair statement.?

The motion was carried unanimously.

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