

Wildlife Park could be ready for first visitors by 2020

By Brock Weir

Aurora's long-gestating wildlife preserve could be ready to welcome its first visitors by 2020.

Council is set to approve a further \$1 million towards its completion this week, which will see construction on Phase One of the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve begin next month.

This first phase will include the construction of three kilometres worth of at-grade trails, several raised boardwalks overtop of marshland, two lookout stations and one bridge. The estimated cost for Phase One is expected to be a total of \$2.6 million.

Construction works within the wildlife park were intended to be phased in over a number of years, to be determined at the point of near completion, of the detailed design phase, said Sarah Tienkamp, Aurora's Manager of Parks and Fleet, in her report to Council. Accordingly, funding has been allocated for \$1 million per year for a total of \$5 million in the 10 Year Capital Plan 2017 to 2021. To date, Council has approved \$2 million with \$1 million allocated in both the 2017 and 2018 Capital Budget. The funds allocated to the 2019 Capital Budget will provide a total budget of \$3 million with an additional \$2 million to be considered in the 2020 and 2021 Capital Budget.

The Aurora Community Wildlife Park has been the subject of many names since its inception, but has been guided by the same core vision originally proposed by Aurora-based landscape architect David Tomlinson.

Mr. Tomlinson has been an active proponent of the wildlife park for over twenty years, with Council endorsing his original proposal in 1998.

Since that time, land has been required to make it a reality.

The parkland is a large swath of grasslands, marsh and wetlands bisecting two housing developments between Aurora's 2B and 2C developments, as can be seen on the north side of Wellington Street East roughly between Mavrinac Boulevard and Elyse Court near the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex.

David Tomlinson had a vision for a community wildlife park after many years of studying the flora and fauna of Aurora, said Ms. Tienkamp. He approached the Town with the idea of establishing a community wildlife park and, in 1998, Council endorsed the proposal. Since then, land acquisition has occurred, development agreements negotiated, and many studies have been completed.

That, however, was just the beginning of a long and winding road which

saw Mr. Tomlinson's proposal dissected in detail by Council before it became bogged down with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) on whether the area should have online or offline ponds; an online pond being one connected to a natural river, creek or stream.

?In progressing through the detailed design process and consultation with the LSRCA, it was noted by LSRCA that their policies do not support online ponds within natural stream systems and floodplains. The detailed design for the wetland component is in the process of being revised to reflect the creation of offline ponds, with additional negotiation required with the LSRCA to address their policies and conditions.?

At the Committee level last Tuesday, Council tentatively approved this year's \$1 million contribution to the plan, which was approved conditionally at budget time. This decision is expected to be ratified at this week's Council meeting.

During last week's discussion, Councillors requested the latest iteration of the Wildlife Park design, which Ms. Tienkamp said ?closely follows? Mr. Tomlinson's original plan for the park, with some realignment of pathways due to on-site conditions. She assured Council, however, that they are following Mr. Tomlinson's original vision.

Among those with questions was Councillor Wendy Gaertner who underscored the sensitivity of the lands in question. Top of mind, she said, was allowing the public access to the park but, at the same time, ensuring members of the public don't wander through and disturb sensitive wildlife habitat.

Ms. Tienkamp responded that plans have trails meandering primarily through the eastern portion of the Park with some side trails allowing connectivity to developments on the west side, all of which are on the perimeter of ponds, ?Set back as far as possible?per David's vision.?

?We are out for tender currently for the first phase, which is construction of the pathways and the boardwalk component,? she said. ?That will be starting construction in June and we hope to have most of that construction done by the end of 2019. There might be a little bit more carryover into 2020, and then in 2020 we hope to go out for the pond construction. Some of the pathways will be able to be accessed in 2020 by the public.?