

Still work to be done to improve Aurora's "urban forests": study

By Brock Weir

Aurora has made strides in preserving, protecting and growing the Town's 'urban forest', but there is still much work to be done, according to a study presented at Council recently.

It was the latest update on UFORE - 'Urban Forest Study' - designed to gauge the health and function of trees, woodlots and other areas around Town and how they relate to the local environment. Beginning in 2013, the study looked at over 200 randomly selected sites on public and private land, to evaluate what is there. It found Aurora's 'Urban Forest' has an estimated 1.95 million trees and shrubs, covering 28 per cent of the area, significantly more than six other municipalities in the Greater Toronto Area that have undertaken similar studies.

When it comes to the public/private divide, the majority of these trees can be found on private property. In terms of statistics, 91 species of trees can be found in Aurora, with nine per cent of these being ash, some currently being treated under Aurora's Emerald Ash Borer program, and others left for private property owners to deal with.

The study was also able to put a value on the function these trees and shrubs provide in the area. Storing over 103,000 metric tonnes of carbon pegs their value at \$8 million, removing up to 93 metric tonnes of air pollution each year for a value of \$711,380 annually, not to mention their contributions to reducing emissions and energy consumption savings.

That being said, there is still work to be done to make things better. According to the report before Council on July 29 by Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, there is a need to develop target levels for urban forest cover, prioritizing different kinds of tree planting to 'improve the distribution of ecosystem services.'

Diversity within the tree population is also underscored in the report, making sure that no species represents more than five per cent of the total population, and providing incentives for private landowners, whether they are residents or business owners, to get on board with what is described as 'strategic tree planting.'

'This was an important step forward in the development of management plans and determining the makeup and condition of our urban forest,' said Mr. Downey. 'Aurora is the first of [York Region's] Northern Six municipalities to conduct a UFORE study and, in doing so, Aurora now has the benefit of possessing accurate information on our urban forest and the measures that can and should be taken to sustain, enhance, and improve our local environment.'

Reviewing the study at the last Council meeting, those around the table had a generally positive reaction, with Mayor Geoffrey Dawe noting he believed the results of the study contradicted many negative comments heard around the table in recent months.

'[The report says,] 'the Town of Aurora's current urban forest coverage is about 28 per cent of the landscape, which is the highest coverage of the six other municipalities in the GTA that participated in the study.' Contrary to what we have heard in this chamber a couple of times earlier, we are actually doing fairly well,' he said. 'That was relayed to me personally by Ian Buchanan, who is Chief Forester for York Region. I am very pleased we are keeping pace.'

Citing a recent workshop on the urban tree canopy, however, Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was less enthusiastic about the statistics in the document.

'Also included in this report is that 74 per cent of all trees in Aurora are less than approximately six inches in diameter, which is not considered ideal, given that the largest trees provide the greatest environmental benefit due to their overall foliage canopy,' she said. 'We need to protect our old trees, we need to protect all the trees that we can. Having little trees is nice, but it is definitely not enough.'