

Aurora needs to make further investments in trees, natural assets: Council

Aurora needs to be proactive in maintaining its trees and natural assets like parks and greenspaces, according to Council.

Council recently passed a motion that will see the implementation of a Natural Capital Asset Management Plan that will increase rehabilitation, monitoring and maintenance of such assets, which also include forests, open spaces and wetlands.

But these services will come with a cost.

The Plan will see a further boost to assessing the condition of such assets, the planting of 2,000 new park and street trees over a 25-year period, a further 11,125 trees planted through existing partnerships, the replacement of 7,000 trees over the same time period (95 per cent of the forecasted need), and further supports of invasive species control and targeted seeding and planting.

The Natural Capital Asset Management Plan (NCAMP) represents an important step towards the continued protection and conservation of the Town's natural areas, said Natalie Kehle, Energy and Climate Change Analyst for the Town of Aurora in a report to Council. Natural ecological areas within Aurora provide numerous benefits that have economic, environmental and societal value. These areas of natural capital provide benefits such as clean water supply, natural filtration of contaminants, water flow stabilization, greenhouse gas mitigation, and climate resiliency, erosion control, nutrient cycling, habitat, recreation, health benefits and cultural pursuits.

The NCAMP takes on a long-term outlook in the sustainability of Town-owned natural assets by incorporating them into existing asset management processes.

As it stands, there are some concerns when it comes to existing natural assets.

Presenting to Council, consultant Elaine Change of SLBC Inc., said 86 per cent of the assets were in good or very good condition, 13 per cent were found to be fair, 1 per cent poor, 0.3 per cent very poor and the assets that were found to be poor or very poor came down to urban trees like street trees.

666 of such trees, she said, were dead or overdue for replacement.

Assuming that park trees live an average of 80 years and street trees an average of 50 years, we estimated about 295 trees per year would require replacement out of the Town's 26,000 urban trees, she said. We have a growing backlog of dead and dying trees.

The staff-recommended scenario, B, she said, would cover 95 per cent of the projected need.

Scenario B costs about \$1.8 million a year, which is a \$300,000 a year increase over the current state, she said. The Plan recommends Scenario B because it would allow the Town to begin a condition assessment program for natural assets. It would allow the Town to increase invasive species control and targeted planting to increase resilience to environmental and climate hazards. It would also allow the Town to increase urban tree replacements to address the current backlog of 666 trees and increase the planting of net new urban trees toward achieving the Town's tree canopy target.

To meet this increased financial pressure, taking it from the tax base was considered along with re-allocating existing funds from elsewhere, but the latter option could impact service levels in other areas, staff cautioned.

We have learned over the years how important trees are for so many reasons, said Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner in support of Scenario B. With respect to climate change, we're talking about flooding, carbon sequestration, and they are so important. Even though the Town is doing relatively better than other municipalities [in targeting these issues] I don't think we should consider that good enough if we have a backlog of trees we haven't planted. It goes to the quality of life in our community.

Cautious support for Scenario B also came from Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson who said he too saw the value and importance of pushing the envelope.

I would be supportive of Scenario B, but we're being asked to approve service levels that have tax implications and trying to figure out how we're going to pay for it later, he said, noting it would result in a .5 per cent increase. It would be helpful if we could have the financial strategy conversation at the same time we're doing this. It's a value, but it would be nice to see the [complete] picture and what that impact is on the budget.

Concluded Councillor Gaertner, I think it is crucial and we have to do this.

By Brock Weir