

Council declares "climate emergency"

Aurora has declared a "climate emergency" in a bid to create a concrete action plan to address issues at a local level.

Council voted unanimously to declare a "climate emergency" following a motion from Councillor Rachel Gilliland, following the lead of more than 450 communities across the country.

The intent of the motion is to "deepen" Aurora's commitment to protecting ecosystems, reducing carbon footprints and spearheading other initiatives to protect the community from the impacts of climate change while, at the same time, ensuring issues related to climate change are fully considered in each item that hits the Council table.

Councillor Gilliland's motion goes on to task municipal staff with creating a Climate Action Plan, reflective of a similar plan forthcoming from the Region of York, allowing the Town to "focus on reducing emissions and adaptation at the community level," and look for opportunities for economic growth related to the low-carbon economy.

Speaking to her motion at last week's Council meeting, Councillor Gilliland said when she was first elected she pursued the issue of a Climate Action Plan, only to find the report stagnating pending staff resources that are now in place. Now, she said, was the time for action.

"This is a victory in the right direction," she said. "In no way am I suggesting our staff is not taking initiatives; rather, this motion is designed to keep the impact of climate change at the top of our inbox. The purpose of this declaration is to allow informed decision-making at the Council table that includes weighing in the carbon impact, among other considerations, in its decisions."

Such possible initiatives, she added, could include requiring more trees to be planted, the automatic inclusion of bike lanes in new projects, a strengthened tree replacement policy for all of Aurora, and additional sections in Council reports dedicated to environmental considerations."

"Flooding, extreme heat, high winds, ice storms and protecting our clean drinking water are all risks the residents of the Town, the Region, the Province and globally abroad are all concerned about," she concluded. "What kind of world are we leaving our children, our grandchildren, if we choose not to stand up, to declare and take action, to do something now and heighten our awareness by keeping climate abatement and mitigation top of mind. We all need to do our part to remedy this crisis we face and I truly hope Aurora Council will join me along with the other 462 municipalities in this declaration and choose to deepen our commitment to protecting our ecosystems and protecting our community from the impacts of climate change we face now and

for the future.?

First out of the gate to support the motion was Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said the actions outlined in the motion were 'absolutely important' to the future.

'Staff has done a lot of great things moving forward and this is just a matter of taking a look at every initiative and making sure we're doing the right things,' she said.

Added Councillor Harold Kim: 'Anything that is about carbon-neutral strategies and saving our planet is well worthwhile. I don't want [this motion] to be a merely symbolic gesture. This is about naming, framing and deepening our commitment to reducing our environmental impact and

[hopefully this]

will lead to an Action Plan. When staff comes back with some kind of report, it needs to be a Call to Action.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas agreed, stating that while this could be 'construed largely as a symbolic motion?', Aurora's commitment is clear. In addressing the motion, the Mayor outlined a number of initiatives that have been going on in the background at Town Hall including the Town's Corporate Environmental Action Plan (CEAP) and its support of the David Suzuki Foundation's Blue Dot Movement, a national campaign to advance the legal recognition of every Canadian's right to a healthy environment.

'What Aurora needs is a plan to include a climate lens in our decision-making,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'When it comes to addressing the impacts of climate change, we need workable solutions now, but we need an integrated approach and we need collaborative solutions for an effective outcome. Climate change doesn't end at Aurora's borders. In fact, it knows no borders. A Regional Climate Change Action Plan will identify overarching principles, objectives and information to guide the work York Region and others undertake to address climate change, to address mitigation and adaptation from a corporate and community perspective. Adopting a region-wide approach to mitigating the impacts of climate change on our communities is how we can work together to get things done. I will be supporting this motion on the floor as it affords this Council the opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to protecting the environment.?'

Also supporting the motion was Councillor Wendy Gaertner, but her support came with conditions. Following on the comments made by Councillor Harold Kim, Councillor Gaertner was also keen to stress that the motion's approval be much more than a symbolic gesture. Rather, she saw the actions outlined in the motion and wanted to make sure enough resources were in place to bring them to fruition.

?If we are really going to take this seriously and declare a climate emergency, we need to have the funding for it. We just can't say, okay, we're going to be a municipality that declares a climate emergency without identifying funding sources and mechanisms so that we can act upon the results. Council is going to approve many studies for the 2020 budget year that will have environmental focus or implications. The studies are good, but we need to have the money to enforce those.?

Doug Nadorozny, CAO for the Town of Aurora, said staff will reflect on the motion now that it has passed and provide a series of recommendations in future reports. Such reports, he said, would remind Council of previous actions they have supported, offering alternatives ? and some of these alternatives might come with increased costs and Council will have to budget accordingly.

By Brock Weir