

Council moves ahead with contract to break stalemate on Wildlife Park

By Brock Weir

Council is set to bring on Cole Engineering to move forward the development of Aurora's Wildlife Park prolonged negotiations and disagreements between the Town, local environmentalists and the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority.

Cole will be retained, pending the final decision of Council this week, to the tune of nearly \$200,000 to develop a detailed design and make a presentation to the Lake Simcoe Conservation Authority that provides a clearer picture of the amenities that will be included in the park and come to a potential compromise on the issue of water control and ponds which has left the Conservation Authority, the final approval body for parks such as these, at odds with local proponents.

The main bone of contention is initial designs from Aurora landscape architect David Tomlinson call for the creation and maintenance of online ponds or, ponds that are connected to and fed by streams and creeks. The Conservation Authority, however, only supports offline ponds.

“This request for proposal was for investigation, analysis and design as well as moving to the tendering process for the Wildlife Park,” said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation Committee at last week's General Committee meeting, which gave the tentative greenlight to the contract. “Presently, we only have a concept from Mr. Tomlinson with regards to what he would envision with regards to the wildlife park. Within that, he identified a number of water features within that park that we needed to do a study to determine from a hydrological perspective whether or not it was even possible to create that number of ponds.

“It took us 18 months to complete that and we have determined there is sufficient water. We can now present that to the Conservation Authority and state we know from a hydrological perspective, this plan works. The Conservation Authority has a plan that prohibits online ponds. Mr. Tomlinson's plan is predicated on having online ponds. However, we need to get to a point where we have a design that is approved or can be approved by the Conservation Authority and then move forward with those design drawings to tender documents.”

Through this new contract, the Conservation Authority (LSRCA) will be presented with two plans ? Mr. Tomlinson's, and one the Town believes will comply with LRSCA guidelines ? for approval.

Mayor Geoff Dawe, Chair of the LSRCA, agreed that the ponds are the main issue at stake.

“The issue of online versus offline ponds is the sticking point,” he said. “The Authority, as a rule, does not support online ponds for any number of reasons and there is no point in going into that now. There is a lot of work on the Authority's website. I want to be clear that the Authority is not creating a plan. It will simply approve the plan.”

During last week's talks, Council members were quick to point out the significance of the Wildlife Park to Aurora, but peppered staff with questions on who ultimately has the final approval for the various components that go into it.

“There is a big difference in what the vision is,” said Councillor John Abel. “I took the time to meet with Mr. Tomlinson and it gave me a much better understanding of what his idea was and what the Conservation Authority is. I hope we are moving forward along his lines, but ultimately we will wait for the Consultant to make the presentation at the [LSRCA].”

Councillor Tom Mrakas expressed a similar view, requesting more information come forward from the LSRCA once there is progress.

“Once they have approved something they can come to explain to us what the differences are, what they allowed, what they didn't, and why,” he said.