

Developments could prove 'catastrophic' to Wildlife Park



By Brock Weir

This week, Council is set to approve a \$200,000 contract to inch the Aurora Wildlife Park 'over 20 years in the making' closer to completion.

The man behind the plan, however, says he has serious concerns about how the plans are progressing and unanswered questions on a parcel of land near the Wellington Street East site that could prove 'catastrophic' to the wildlife reserve.

Approved in principle in 1998 after several years of studies, plans for the Wildlife Park have evolved, and have been the subject of Council debate and talks at the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority, but it was recently found that two acres adjacent to the park, previously thought to have been land earmarked for the park were, in fact, still owned by developers.

The parcel was part of a six acre site, but landscape architect David Tomlinson says only the two acres closest to the parkland are 'critical.'

'The extensive area of grassland is now under threat from more houses which can be built on a two acre parcel of land located in the centre of [the park's] grassland and the adjoining wetland complex, which until recently I thought was protected from more development,' Mr. Tomlinson tells The Auroran. 'About 12 months ago, I was asked by the Director of the Parks and Rec Department if I would meet with the developers to ask them if they would be willing to sell this critical area of grassland to the Town. The outcome was that the developers were willing to sell the two acres to the Town at market prices if Council would approve housing on the remaining four acres.'

'The cost of this land purchase would be about \$2 million, or roughly 5 per cent of the \$35 million dollar Hydro Fund. Although this is a lot of money, it didn't seem an unreasonable sum to protect what remains of the critical wildlife habitat in the built-up portion of Aurora as we all live on land that was once wildlife habitat before it was destroyed when our homes were built.'

Mr. Tomlinson took his concerns to Council last year, urging them to purchase the two acre parcel and subsequently took several members of Council to the site which lies north of Wellington in the open greenspace between Bayview Avenue and Leslie Street. He says he was encouraged after their tour and the potential purchase of the property was the subject of a number of closed session meetings of local lawmakers.

Nearly a year on, Mr. Tomlinson is looking for a clear picture of where things stand.

'Recently, I was informed that the developers had put in a planning application to develop the total six acres, so I am assuming that

most Councillors did not agree to purchase the land or, as usual, they failed to come to an agreement, so the land will be developed due to Council indecision. If this is the case, I am asking the citizens of Aurora to support me over the purchase of this land. Generally, as my record will show, I am not keen on spending taxpayers' money and I would not ask [citizens] to support me at this time, unless I thought this was a critical issue as we will only get one chance to do this right.

?My original concept was to develop this nature reserve as economically as possible with the minimum of consultant reports, preferably using direct labour rather than using expensive outside contractors, as an example of how towns less wealthy than Aurora could develop similar nature reserves in their municipalities, but this is not going to happen. To date, between \$300,000 to \$400,000 has been spent on consultants' reports, including over \$200,000 to carry out a feasibility study of my original proposal which the consultant agreed was totally feasible, providing a few non-legally-binding Lake Simcoe Conservation Authority policies were modified.

?I also understand that an engineering consultant was hired for \$50,000 to study repairs or the replacement of a water control feature on the north pond dam. I would think any engineer worth his salt, including the engineer on the Town's staff should be able to repair or replace this water control and repair the dam, after all this is just a field pond dam, not the Hoover Dam!?

Over the last few months, additional concerns have cropped up regarding the design of the reserve, including a major trail that has been put in what Mr. Tomlinson describes as the ?most undesirable? location in the buffer zones, a concern he says is shared with Ducks Unlimited, one of the owners of land included within the Wildlife Park.

?At a recent meeting I had with Ducks Unlimited, we expressed our concerns about this lack of understanding and during the discussion we realised we knew [more] than their staff about the current status of the reserve,? says Mr. Tomlinson. ?Both their staff and ourselves agreed that the reinstatement of the Nature Reserve's technical committee would have gone a long way to prevent this and similar problems from developing in the not-too-distant future. The re-instatement of this technical group would also have been able to provide much of the information now being provided by paid consultants.

?To date, it has not even been possible to agree on a name for the reserve. Ducks Unlimited refers to it as the Ivy Jay Community Nature Reserve, while the Town calls it the Aurora Community Nature Reserve. Jim Spring and his family donated the land to Ducks Unlimited worth several millions of dollars and indicated that they would like it to be called the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve as this was the name of the family farm that now forms the core area of the reserve.?