

Economic value of trees, parks and nature to be calculated

Can you put a price on a tree?

Sure, there's a cost to buying a sapling for your property, and there's a cost to get a permit to cut one down, but what about the value it provides when firmly rooted in the ground?

That's a price Aurora residents might soon learn through a new study that will place a value on the services the community's natural assets provide residents.

Earlier this summer, Council unanimously approved a motion from Councillor Rachel Gilliland calling for a study looking at just that be included in Aurora's 2023 Capital Budget.

The last economic value of natural capital assets associated with the Ecosystem Protection Review was in 2013, but did not fall in line with the Asset Management Planning for Municipal Infrastructure, said Councillor Gilliland in her motion. Land values have changed significantly in the last 10 years and natural capital assets are becoming more at risk of endangerment and identified as important key recommended assets in mitigating climate change and adaptation plans.

A natural capital assets study should also include stewardship plans and maintenance best practices to enhance and protect these features.

Speaking at the Council table in support of her motion, the Councillor added that people often tend to take for granted the vast array of benefits nature provides us, including clean air from our trees, water filtration in our wetlands, and the role of forests as carbon sinks.

It doesn't even account for the mental health and spiritual benefits people receive spending [time] in nature, which is really important, she said. In some past reports in Aurora we have identified natural ecological areas providing numerous benefits that have economic value. These areas of natural capital provide economic benefits such as clean water supply, natural filtration of contaminants, water flow stabilization, greenhouse gas emissions, erosion control, nutrient cycling. It has been increasingly clear that the health of our families and communities around us depends on the health of the ecosystems that surround us.

Programs to protect, restore and enhance these natural capital assets is something that is gaining a lot of support across Canada and, by attending the Federal and Provincial Climate Caucus meetings, something that has been a very hot topic of discussion addressing climate change and contributing to our overall health and wellbeing.

Ahead of a Climate Change Adaptation Plan being presented to Council, now was the time to bring something forward to align with these and other plans that are in the works, she concluded.

The motion found uniform support around the Council table with Councillor Sandra Humfries, for instance, stating that it was simply the right thing to do.

We started a natural asset management inventory years ago and there was a software system we were going to think about and it was going to allow us to understand our natural resources and inventory them and ensure there's obviously value equal to all those assets, said Councillor Humfries before asking how this would dovetail with previous work.

Staff replied that the work done in the last study will be used in the new plan to inform what is to come.

I think this is a wonderful initiative we need to do, said Councillor Humfries.

Also voicing their support was Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said the value of natural capital assets can't be underestimated.

?It is very important and we need to do everything we can to figure out how we can keep as large a tree canopy as possible,? she said.

Added Mayor Tom Mrakas: ?We always look at where we can update plans that have been sitting on the shelf for 10 years and more, and whether it is plans, whether it's bylaws, we're always looking at how we can [keep them up-to-date]. Thank you for bringing this forward; it is obviously time?to look at updating it and making sure our asset management plan moves forward in a way that is productive for our Town.?

When it was clear the motion would pass, Councillor Gilliland said it was a move that would be appreciated well beyond the Council table.

?I know residents really appreciate this as well,? she concluded. ?Climate has definitely been a topic of conversation amongst Council, governments, and people and families in their homes. I really think this is going to help us identify natural capital assets we have in our Town.?

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