

Legacy, end-of-life care for Aurora's heritage trees considered

Efforts to recognize Aurora's oldest trees gained momentum this month as the Town's Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee considered not only what makes a tree 'heritage' but how their legacy should be celebrated if they can't be preserved.

Aurora began taking a look at 'heritage' trees in September of last year following Council's adoption of a motion put forward by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland. It tasked staff with returning a report on recommendations to ensure the long-term protection of designated trees, including long-term health plans, as well as appropriate ways to commemorate the trees in question.

'Aurora is home to a handful of trees believed to be senescent or centenarian in nature, are presenting important natural, cultural and historical significance, and these trees serve as living testament and hold future cultivar legacies to Aurora's ecological heritage,' said Councillor Gilliland in her motion.

The resulting report, penned by Manager of Parks and Fleet Matthew Volpintesta, was presented to the Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee last week.

The committee focused on the end-of-life tree management guide within the report, which notes the first step in the process will be firming up the criteria of 'what characterizes a tree as having cultural or natural heritage significance.'

Once the trees are selected, they should then be thoroughly documented for the historical archives.

'Risk assessment should confirm structural decline and assess health under existing tree categorization,' the report states. 'There is also a public engagement component which would seek input, including notifying public, community and stakeholders, [and] consider commemorative options.'

If the tree fails, the report notes their lumber could be transformed into park furniture, such as picnic tables, public art installations, and more. Seeds and cuttings could also ensure their legacy continues.

'Ultimately, this is going to be a policy that allows us to put a framework around how to [commemorate the oldest trees in Aurora] and support that ' and not just protect them in the short term, but have an end-of-life, because a lot of them have cultural significance within the Town, whether it is sentimental, or whether it is due to its age, or its species, or events around it,' said Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Director of Operations, at last week's Committee meeting. 'This way, if we have an end-of-life, we can collect seeds, we can grow some of these strains, and put them back into our naturalized areas and have longevity of certain trees of significance for years and years to come.'

At this point, the program is only going to consider trees on municipal property, Tienkamp noted. Some of the eligible trees being considered under this criterion include several centuries-old Burr oaks in the Aurora Community Arboretum and elms on Henderson Drive that have stood for more than 100 years, withstanding the scourge of Dutch Elm Disease.

'We've identified only about 15 trees that we would start with,' she said, adding some of the Arboretum's burr oaks have already been recognized through a plaquing program. 'There's some large elm trees down Henderson Drive that are quite rare'. Those specific ones [we] have actually worked with the University of Guelph and they've taken tissue samples from those because they're actually genetically resistant to Dutch elm disease. There are a few other heritage trees within the old part of Town, certainly around Catherine Street [and] Town Park that we have on our radar, but we're going to start with those ones' and then expand it.'

The program, of course, will come at a cost, and funding opportunities are being explored, she noted, but, 'It's all part of our ultimate strategy to expand our urban forest.'

'Urban forest is certainly important from a CO2 reduction [standpoint]. Also, we have very explicit targets that we've set with

Council's endorsement for a 40 per cent canopy target, so keeping these trees healthy and as long as we can keep them within the urban forest is important, but we need to bring along with it maintenance and funding associated so we can maintain these trees.

?Baby steps to start, but I can see it expanding over the years and that's part of this ? that we can create a framework that we can project out which ones we will dedicate next and whether we'll expand the program into private trees at some point, and maybe even into our woodlots. Our woodlots are fairly well-protected right now, but bringing them into identifying some of them that are significant trail systems will be the second and third phase of it.?

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