

Policy changes needed to make wildlife park a reality

By Brock Weir

Long-gestating plans for Aurora's wildlife park are feasible, but it will take some policy changes from the Town of Aurora and the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority to make it a reality, according to experts.

Plans for a wildlife park have been in the works at Town Hall for nearly two decades, first envisioned by local landscape architect David Tomlinson. It is a plan that has received the support of several successive councils, but now that the plan is in the home stretch following a two-and-a-half year independent review of the wildlife park plan, the ball is now in the municipality's court.

The proposed wildlife park -- officially, and tentatively, known as the Ivy Jay Nature Reserve -- is situated in east Aurora, roughly straddling the boundaries between Aurora's 2B and 2C developments, bordered in the north and south ends by St. John's Sideroad and Wellington Street.

For Mr. Tomlinson, it is important Council puts the pressure on the Conservation Authority (LSRCA) sooner rather than later to get the reserve up and running.

"Most of the 2C Development is way, way ahead and it is moving at a colossal speed," said Mr. Tomlinson. "The roads are in, the services are in, and they are already starting to build houses. In 2B, it took them 10 years to get the houses from Bayview Avenue to the western boundary of the nature reserve. It has taken barely two years to get the whole of this area developed and time is running short.

"We managed to stop people getting in from the west side when we were doing the preliminary work, but now the other side is being built and it is important we move along swiftly with this project."

Of primary concern, he noted, was the issue of water within the reserve area. The land in question contains streams and a number of small ponds and wetlands, some natural and some artificial created over years of agricultural use.

While the LSRCA's policy now shies away from the use of stormwater management ponds in favour of more sustainable solutions such as permeable pavement and other means, exceptions should be made in this area because it is "critical" to have this stored water on site to combat issues that might arise in a particularly dry season, said Mr. Tomlinson, but this storm water should only be used in cases of emergencies.

"I think it would be a good idea to store water in these ponds to be used in really exceptionally dry years, but the best way would be to build a special pond to store water in," he said. "There is a narrow valley that can store clean water off the Oak Ridges Moraine, but unfortunately it will be against Conservation Authority policy to do this."

Their policies favour "offline" ponds that are not connected to exiting rivers, creeks and streams, over "online" ponds as creating ponds out of these surface waterways could have an adverse effect on temperatures in these bodies of water and, in turn, fish population and migration.

There are currently two online ponds in the wildlife park area, but developments to the south of the park, and the large dam at Newmarket's Fairy Lake make the point of fish migration between points A and B irrelevant, Mr. Tomlinson contended.

"Even if we do exactly what the Conservation Authority want, it is not going to change fish migration. This whole policy just does not work in the nature reserve and I think this is going to set the example for future ways of dealing with wildlife in all urban areas and I think it is our opportunity to do something sensible and negotiate with the Conservation Authority to waive these regulations when it comes to habitat management. We have to modify the policies to get it done. It is a policy, it is not a legal obligation. It is a policy the Town should challenge."

Mr. Tomlinson's viewpoint was bolstered recently at this month's Council meeting by consultant Mark Setter, whose company was tasked with reviewing the feasibility of the local landscape architect's plan.

“As a consulting team, our main objectives and focus was to assess the feasibility of David Tomlinson's plan from a scientific water management perspective and from a policy point of view,” said Mr. Setter. “From a hydrogeological point of view, David's concepts will work. There is enough water out there from surface, groundwater. Yes, they will work. From a policy point of view ? and we're dealing with today's policies ? they're not feasible.

“Under the LSRCA, that policy does not allow online ponds and most of David's design was based on online ponds. We had to modify the design so we modified the design, keeping all our wetland features, but at least we believe we created the habitat that David wanted to achieve through offline ponds, through more or less stealing water from storm ponds. We totally believe this community wildlife park is feasible and I think this is only the beginning.”