

Stronach Eco Park clears zoning hurdle



(Concept drawings show a revised vision for the ecological park. Image courtesy of the Stronach Group)

By Brock Weir

Frank Stronach's 'legacy' project of an 80 acre Eco Park for Aurora cleared a significant hurdle last week.

Councillors signed off on a zoning amendment to open space to clear the way for parkland development 'with passive and active educational and recreational opportunities.'

Although much more work needs to be done in collaboration with the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA), Ontario's Ministry of Natural Resources, and the municipality, the park as planned will include extensive natural trails wildlife habitat, three soccer pitches open to the community, and an education centre.

Since the proposal was first floated at Council last fall, negotiations between The Stronach Group, regulatory bodies, and advisory committees have led to a slightly scaled back version than what was originally proposed.

'The bulk of the site will remain in a natural area as part of the valley corridor with some educational and interpretive elements added to that,' said landscape architect Marc Schollen.

Mr. Schollen outlined several changes that have been made to the site, including mitigation that will need to be done to accommodate habitat for eastern meadowlark and bobolink on the site, a significantly reduced parking area down to 166 spaces from the originally proposed 457, increasing trail connections, and nixing a previously proposed banquet facility.

Soccer fields have been slightly tweaked and the size of the educational centre has been reduced to focus more on a classroom environment.

'We are still committed to meeting with local efforts and also the subcommittees of Council and we are still continuing to dialogue with additional partners that would be involved in delivering some of the programs on the site,' said Mr. Schollen.

While the zoning changes for the Stronach Eco Park cleared a Special Council meeting last week, the project 'as well as the scaled back nature of the project' received some mixed reviews from Councillors, as well as a member of the public.

Judy Gilchrist, a member of Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee, has often expressed doubts on the park, particularly in relation to its role on the Oak Ridges Moraine. She said including any small scale institution on the site would be a 'slippery slope' for similar sites.

'I hope you are going to be able to stand up in front of your children and grandchildren and say, 'Wow! I made a decision about providing you with three soccer fields,' vs. 'Wow! I had an opportunity make a decision about protecting a very large, beautiful, natural area.'

The majority of Councillors, however, will not be losing any sleep over what they are going to be able to tell their kids and grandkids, going by comments made at Wednesday's meeting.

'It is a wonderful plan and I think it will be a destination attraction for Aurora and we should be very happy to see it coming,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'If it turns out as it is here, I will certainly be proud to tell my kids about it.'

Councillor John Abel also said he was 'impressed' with the proposal.

'[Aurora] is going to share the generosity of Magna and Mr. Stronach and it is just a fantastic facility that covers many things,' said Councillor Abel. 'I was most impressed with the first presentation Council saw and all the revisions.'

Added Mayor Geoffrey Dawe: 'I think it is a fabulous project. I am very pleased you have taken the input from our various committees and done some rejigging. It looks spectacular and I very much look forward to seeing it come to fruition.'

Speaking in favour of the plan, and addressing some of the environmental concerns made earlier in the meeting, Councillors questioned what could eventually be built in place of the Eco Park should the rezoning not go through. Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, said if the development immediately south of the proposed property is any indication, this land could accommodate up to 90 large residential lots.

'When we talk about legacy and explaining to our children the benefit of having strong ecological features, the fact that there aren't an additional 80 or 90 homes in this location? I think this opportunity will continue to serve the children for generations to come,' said Councillor Paul Pirri.

Less enthusiastic about the plans were Councillors Chris Ballard, Evelyn Buck, Wendy Gaertner, and John Gallo. Although Councillor Buck ultimately voted in favour of the plan, she said she was somewhat 'concerned' that it had been scaled back from the original vision.

'I couldn't believe that we could be so fortunate in the Town of Aurora to have such a facility for the enjoyment of people here now and future generations,' she said. 'I'm a little concerned to find it has been scaled back somewhat.'

The others' concerns had to do with the process in what they said asked them to approve a bylaw then and there without a formalized bylaw coming back for further review and approval.

'I am happy to move forward with this [but] I am not happy to approve a bylaw I do not have before me,' said Councillor Gallo. 'If all of you are happy with approving a bylaw you don't have in front of you, that is okay too, but I do not feel comfortable doing that.'

Mr. Stronach's intention to turn the park over to the Town in due course was also reiterated.