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Town of Aurora
Memorandum
Operational Services

Re: Aurora Forest Study Recommended Policy Updates

To: Environmental Advisory Committee

From: Matthew Volpintesta, Manager Parks and Fleet

Date: October 21, 2024

Recommendation

1. That the memorandum regarding Aurora Forest Study Recommended Policy Updates be received; and
2. That the Environmental Advisory Committee comments regarding Aurora Forest Study Recommended Policy Updates be received and referred to staff for consideration and further action as appropriate.

Background

The Town's Urban Forest Study (2024) provided 36 recommendations and a Council recommendation to increase the Town canopy target to 40 per cent coverage by 2034.

Prepared and presented to Council by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) (Report No. OPS24-001), the Town's most recent update to the Urban Forest Study (2024) outlines 36 recommendations which are categorized into three levels of priority. Though the endorsement of the study at the February 6, 2024, General Committee meeting, Council also brought forward a motion to endorse a target of 40 per cent total canopy cover, to be achieved by 2035 (Recommendation #2, Aurora Urban Forest Study 2024). Protecting and enhancing the Town's tree canopy and urban forests have multi-tiered benefits to Aurora's residents and businesses. Beyond the impact of trees on an ecological and social scale, Aurora's forests carry a significant replacement value of 66.4 million in 2024 as identified within the 2024 Natural Capital Asset Management Plan.

The 2024 update to the Urban Forest Study was the second iteration of the data collected first in 2013 which served as a baseline. To track progress, study partners

committed to conducting sample-based field surveys, done over a 10-year period. The objectives of the study included:

- Assessment of canopy cover distribution.
- Quantify current species composition, size and condition of Aurora's forest.
- Quantify ecosystem services and benefits provided by the forest.
- Assess change in the distribution and structure of the forest since the last study.

Of the 36 recommendations, the following are high priority and will be targeted for implementation within a three-to-five-year window:

- As part of an update to the Town's Urban Forest Management Plan, the Town will review and update its urban forest policies. This will include updates to the landscape design standards and tree compensation policies. The plan will also address local canopy targets, species diversity, forest health, maintenance, and monitoring, invasive species management, soil conservation strategies and climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Continue to plant, prune, and replace trees on municipal roads, parks, and other municipal properties. Evaluate planting and maintenance budgets regularly as the Town grows and assumes responsibility for new roads, parks, and facilities.

Continue to establish a diverse tree population in intensively managed urban areas. Set a long term goal for no single species to make up more than five per cent, no genus more than 10 per cent and no family more than 20 per cent of the tree population, both town-wide and in each neighbourhood.

- Utilize native and appropriate non-native, non-invasive planting stock in both intensively and extensively managed areas. Increase genetic diversity of tree populations by using the guidance provided by the *Ontario Tree Seed Transfer Policy*. Consider integrating seed zone contract requirements to ensure planting stock are selected from appropriate seed zones tolerant of the Town's soil characteristics.
- Continue to promote the proportion of large, mature trees across Aurora's urban forest by the regulation of tree injury or removal through the application and enforcement of the *Private Tree Protection By-law* (By-law 5850-16) and public sector by the *Town of Aurora Tree Removal/Pruning Compensation Policy*.

- Consider targeted removal of high priority invasive plant species at high priority sites following best practices.
- Consider revising the “Tree Planting and Approved Plant List” to remove both Japanese tree lilac and callery pear from the ornamental tree list due to the invasive potential of these species.
- Develop a monitoring and action strategy for invasive species, including pests and diseases, and continue taking proactive approaches to address new and emerging invasive species, such as hemlock woolly adelgid and oak wilt.
- Continue assessing forest structure, function, and distribution every ten years through the Urban Forest Studies.
- Develop a post-tree planting management and monitoring strategy to complement the tree maintenance program to ensure tree survivorship and mitigate common stressors in the urban environment.
- Assess the Town’s current recommended planting list based on the climate vulnerability of each species. Shift recommendations to native and appropriate non-native, non-invasive species that have a higher tolerance and lower vulnerability to climate change impacts.
- Begin to integrate green infrastructure into asset management planning, particularly for street trees and other municipal natural assets like woodlands and wetlands.

Analysis

The Town actively manages the urban forest through several projects and programs, including invasive species management, tree planting and habitat enhancement through naturalization projects. This includes overseeing private tree protection, compensation and replacement, as well as development review.

At present, the Town operates within the scope of programming and projects from both the operating and capital budget, all of which contribute to the health and success of Aurora’s urban forest. Through partnerships with not-for-profit environmental groups and conservation authorities, each year the Town hosts various planting events, naturalization projects and invasive species remediation.

As part of our ongoing commitment to the natural environment, staff are continuously looking for opportunities to further naturalize existing parkland. In 2024, the Town partnered with LEAF to plant over 1,000 new trees in Aurora. Further, in partnership with LRSCA, the Hamilton Park wetland naturalization project will see planting of over 1,000 species of trees and shrubs. Replacing traditional turf with naturalized areas not only contributes to greater ecological function, but it also provides efficiencies in operational maintenance, such as less grass mowing. Through our partnerships with the Aurora Arboretum, Ontario Heritage Trust, Case woodlot Guardians, school groups, and our Adopt-a-park program, the Town is actively working to educate and transform greenspaces and mitigate invasive species such as European buckthorn, phragmites, and garlic mustard. The David Tomlinson Nature Reserve is another successful example of naturalization and habitat enhancement with a focus natural ecology.

Through a seven-year cycle, Town-owned Street trees are maintained through maintenance pruning, and replacement of dead or dying trees. This is tracked through our annual tree inventory. The same is true for trees found in parks, within trails and natural heritage systems and Town facilities. Disease, pest, and invasive mitigation impacting Town-owned trees are currently managed through the annual operating budget.

Each of these above-mentioned projects are funded through our capital and operating budget and play an important role in reaching a 35 per cent canopy cover in Aurora. The Town also actively pursues grants and funding programs which support natural ecology restoration, plantings, and invasives removal. To meet or exceed the 40 per cent canopy cover target proposed by 2034, staff are in alignment with the endorsed recommendations.

Proposed short-term and long-term policy updates include refinement of the *Private Tree Protection By-Law (5850-16)*, and *Tree Removal/Pruning and Compensation Policy*, as well as proposed updates to the boulevard tree planting and maintenance practices.

A key practice in which the Town ensures that the urban forest is protected, maintained and expanded, is through the *Private Tree Protection By-Law (5850-16)*, and *Tree Removal/Pruning and Compensation Policy*. Highlighted as a priority recommendation within the urban forest study, staff are proposing a focus be made in updating these policies as a first and significant step toward our canopy cover targets.

As such, staff are proposing to conduct a Best Practices Review in 2025 of partner municipal policies and seek recommendations from stakeholders and return to Council with a report which outlines options and details proposed policy updates to both the *Private Tree Protection By-Law* and tree removal and compensation policies. Staff will seek to enhance measures which will more greatly protect our urban forest, including consideration of lowering the tree removal threshold which triggers a permit and compensation, to one tree, and factors around trunk size which require a permit and or compensation. This also would include a review of fees to remove trees and ensuring that charges are in alignment with regional and provincial municipal counterparts.

Staff will also provide an additional report to Council in 2025 outlining detailed programming recommendations and policy updates focusing on invasive species management, and landscaping treatments through development review. This will include revising the landscape design guidelines, which focus on tree planting best-practices, design, consideration of soil volume, watering regime, species selection, and spacing within boulevard treatment.

A revised approved planting list is another key recommendation within the urban forest study report. In consultation with TRCA, staff have already started implementing these recommendations on a case-by-case basis through active tree replacements, new projects which include tree plantings, and development review.

The Town to seek feedback and incorporate recommendations from stakeholders including conservation authorities and Town residents through Engage Aurora.

As part of the Best Practices Review and planned 2025 report with recommended updates to the *Private Tree Protection By-Law (5850-16)*, and *Tree Removal/Pruning and Compensation Policy*, staff will utilize engage aurora and seek feedback from the public, development industry, internal stakeholders and partner organizations, to ensure all perspectives and expert opinions are considered.

The Town to review operational budget and staff capacity with a three-to five-year outlook, and beyond, to ensure resources are available to support implementation of the priority recommendations.

To facilitate future implementation of an updated *Private Tree Protection By-Law (5850-16)*, and *Tree Removal/Pruning and Compensation Policy*, including thorough development review and tree permit processing, staff are proposing to review existing capacity to deliver and implement key updates to standard operating procedures as it

relates. More specifically, this includes reviewing operational budget needs to ensure funding is keeping pace with canopy growth whilst private and public trees mature as it relates to arboriculture practices, contracted works, replacement plantings and pruning. To facilitate this work, including maintenance of Town owned trees, considerations should be made around enhancements to labour force, potentially seeking to input a new or modified staff position which focuses primarily on development review from both a forestry and landscape architecture lens, as well as management of Town-owned tree inventory.

Conclusion

In order to meet a 40 per cent canopy target by 2034, the recommendations within the 2023 Urban Forest Study should be strategically implemented, with appropriate resources over the next five to ten years secured to ensure staff are equipped to support our forest through various recommendations and measures. As such staff are recommending an update to the Private Tree Protection By-Law (5850-16), and Tree Removal/Pruning and Compensation Policy, as well as proposed updates to the boulevard tree planting and maintenance practices, which will be detailed in a future report to Council.

Attachments

None.