

King's Climate Action Plan nearing completion; council gives more time for input

By Mark PavilonsEditor

King council decided to give local stakeholders more time to digest and comment on the Township's first Climate Action Plan. Councillors were ready to approve the document at the last council meeting, but members of the public asked for a delay and more consultation. They believe there's more to add to make this a more comprehensive strategy. Chris Fasciano, director of Community Services, said it has been a long, extensive process, one that involved the community the whole way. Josh Welch, King's Climate Change Coordinator, pointed out that the Township itself only produces less than .5% of the municipality's emissions. The plan is geared to take King through 2050, but Welch noted there would be continual updates and changes, since it's a fluid document. The first steps included an emissions inventory, goals and targets, outlining a clear direction and setting priorities. He said the Township ensured public feedback, but admitted the limitations of the pandemic hindered their approach. They did receive more than 300 survey responses and countless submissions. King's goal as a Township is a 45% reduction, but the actual target is 35%. Welch pointed out that surprisingly, King is higher than Toronto, India and the UK in terms of per capita CO₂e emitters. In general, the per capita emissions model is based on a population stat over a total emissions statistic. Given the large geography of King, with small population (relative to size) and relatively high emissions based on King's habits, like transportation (specifically heavy use of personal vehicles for commuting, 60% of the commuting population travelling for 30 minutes or longer), this is in part the reason for King's level. Welch did point out the increase in population in coming years would decrease our per capita emissions partly. Moving forward in 2022, King will expand its green fleet; make improvements to the Trisan Centre; ensure the new Recreation Centre has a near, net-zero design; create an electric charging policy and more. Members of the public asked for a pause, saying the plan is not ready to go. Councillor Jordan Cescolini was the lone voice in wanting the plan approved so King can move forward and get the ball rolling. He said consultation can be ongoing and the plan can be tweaked, but it's important to start. Mayor Steve Pellegrini said we all need to move together on this and there's no need to rush. He wants everyone to have a good read so that in the end, it's a call to arms. He wants to make sure the public's voices are heard. It's all hands on deck, he said. This (final plan) should be a celebration. Following council's decision, Bruce Craig, on behalf of Concerned Citizens of King Township (CCKT), said they welcome council's decision to provide a brief additional period of time for community engagement. CCKT would be pleased to participate in the proposed task force. At the Jan. 24 council meeting, Craig said the KCAP provides an excellent foundation and includes many forward-looking ideas across many sectors including transportation, natural heritage and home and building retrofits and construction. He requested additional time to review, noting the plan was only released a few days prior to the council meeting. CCKT suggested an additional two months. CCKT heartily supports the goals of restoration and preservation of natural heritage systems in King's settlement areas and rural areas including the increase of the tree canopy. As well, all wetlands need to be sustained and restored where possible, as they play a highly important role in sequestering carbon and mitigating the effects of extreme rain events and drought. Look for opportunities to enhance existing wetlands, he told council. Craig pointed to the significant loss of the tree canopy happening on an ongoing basis through tree removal particularly in King's three settlement areas. We need to preserve our trees for today and tomorrow. CCKT recommends the crafting and swift implementation of an effective King Private Tree Protection Bylaw before more and more trees are lost. Let's seek to engage everyone in the Action Plan, he said. It is clear we can do what's needed quickly and well. Let's roll up our sleeves with all hands on deck and move forward with the Action Plan. Susan Beharriell also pointed to a rather short window for public review of the document. She also charged that while surveys were done, local groups were not part of drafting the plan. She, too, asked for a pause to allow time for the draft to be compared to the worldwide standards recommended by the David SUZUKI Foundation and international scientists. The plan, in its current form, is restrained by the draft York Region Plan that anticipates determining its own targets 10 years from now. It provides little evidence of what taking a specific action will do to reduce emissions. Once the extended consultation is completed, council could then make the well-considered changes and review and approve a plan by the end of April. Beharriell said one significant omission deals with protecting the tree canopy now present in King. Just planting babies, will not solve our problems, but saving healthy mature trees brings instant benefits, she said. The plan is developed in alignment with King's declaration of a climate emergency back in 2019. The plan sets out building blocks and identifies 25 actions over several time frames, moving King towards a low-carbon future. The staff report noted King as a whole emits roughly 250,000 tonnes of CO₂

equivalent. The largest contributor to emissions is transportation (vehicles) and residential heating and cooling. The Climate Plan gives the community, staff and council a better understanding of how to reach their goals, knowing where the emissions are coming from. The guiding actions can help the municipality and its residents reduce current and future emissions. The plan addresses mitigating climate change, enhances natural heritage, promotes conservation and reduction. The actions outlined in this plan will require staff, council and the public to work diligently over the coming years to make the necessary changes, transitions and recovery; working with one another, partners and at all levels of government to see King as the green climate-driven leader we promised to be, said the staff report. The task ahead is not a simple one. The meaningful action we all must take to prevent the global temperature rise and curb emissions is as important as any other threat we as humans face. Working together, King community members can prosper and benefit from the climate action outlined within this plan and future iterations, creating healthier, more sustainable communities; protection and preservation of our vast natural environments, active and sustainable lifestyles, and supporting a stronger, more resilient King for all.