

King updates its tree management plan

By Mark PavilonsEditor

One-third of King Township enjoys a healthy tree cover. Protecting those trees – an asset potentially worth hundreds of millions of dollars – is vitally important. King staff presented a draft Tree Management Plan to councillors recently. While the plan was praised and seen as forward-looking, some residents don't believe it goes far enough. In fact, some wanted council to reopen the discussion on a private tree bylaw, an effort that failed to draw support a few years ago. The comprehensive draft plan covers everything from planting standards to undesirable species, in a well laid out document. It really formalizes what staff have been doing over the years. Kyle Brett, manager of parks services, noted King has roughly 10,000 urban street trees and many more line its 300 kilometres of roads. With 1,100 acres of open space, King's tree "value" could very well exceed \$100 million. King wants to be a leader in the protection and enhance of the overall tree canopy in King and this plan will go a long way in making that happen. The Township wants to not only protect the tree canopy, but train staff and facilitate community participation. Brett explained that the majority (80%) of King's services are contracted out, but staff are responsible for maintenance work, emergency work, protection and enhancement and service delivery. Maintenance involves everything from planting and pruning to removal and managing invasive species. He also explained that they have a three-tier replanting strategy that includes ratios for replacement. Chris Fasciano, director of community services, said his staff are aligned with public works and they all review and comment on development applications, especially when trees are removed. Mayor Steve Pellegrini noted that he would like to see higher fines and penalties implemented so it's more of a deterrent if rules are broken. In 2015, all forestry work was consolidated in King under Parks and Forestry of Community Services and the first arborist was hired in 2021. Forestry operations have grown and this formal plan represents guidelines for moving forward. "The Municipal Tree Management Plan provides staff with clear direction for service level standards and expectations. Additionally, the plan will guide staff to meet strategic goals and milestones while implementing the action items and recommendations." Jennifer Hobbs, on behalf of Climate Action King, wanted to emphasize the protection of private trees, since the new plan only deals with public trees and canopy growth targets. She noted a Private Tree Bylaw was presented to King Township Council in 2019, but was not approved. Even people who were opposed to the proposed bylaw in 2019, expressed concerns about the threat to trees due to development. CAK does acknowledge staff's work in preparing the plan and the impressive amount of word work done to inventory municipal trees. "The document appears to be an excellent tool for staff to promote best practices in tree management," she said. "However, the TMP focuses on public trees – we wish to emphasize the protection of private trees to meet tree canopy growth targets. We know residents have had mixed feelings when tree bylaws have been discussed in the past. In 2019, a Private Tree Bylaw was presented to King Council but was rejected. The staff report at the time (CL-2019-23) noted: "many (residents) expressed concern of the threat to significant trees in mature, existing neighbourhoods due to the replacement homes being built." She said "full autonomy" for residents has led to the loss of countless trees on private property. Since 2019, the Township of King has received dozens of development proposals and hundreds of building permit applications which have resulted in the destruction of countless trees. More people want to protect trees because they see the destruction in their neighbourhood and the impact on the communities. "We believe it's time to reconsider a Private Tree Bylaw for King Township." CAK is hearing a groundswell of concern about the changing look of mature neighbourhoods, she noted. She pointed out that King Township Council declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019 by unanimous vote and trees have been identified as a crucial mitigator of climate change. Sources agree that trees mitigate climate change – they play a crucial role in converting carbon and environmental pollutants to breathable oxygen. "Just as streets, buildings, and recreational facilities are a part of a community, so too are trees. Trees have intrinsic social, environmental, and economic value. They make our community better; they enhance our property values and improve our mental health. It is not just publicly accessible trees that improve our world; trees on private property play a role as well." Hobbs stressed that all York Region municipalities have a private tree bylaw except Georgina, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury and King Township. The TMP states that: "King Township strives to be a leader in greening our communities," "but how can we be a leader if we don't protect trees on private property, she asked. Hobbs pointed to Newmarket's tree plan and noted the city has been able to estimate the economic value of its trees. They've costed out the value of avoided water runoff, residential energy savings, the removal of air pollutants and carbon sequestered. The replacement value of Newmarket's trees – considering the full scope of their economic value – has been estimated to exceed \$350 million. They

also report that 68% of Newmarket's trees are on private property. Like Newmarket the majority of King's trees are on private land, and we believe King can and should obtain similar information about its own trees. King's tree canopy is 34.3% of the Township's total area and York Region has set a target for King Township's canopy at 36 to 41%. To meet our canopy targets, it's much more effective to preserve mature trees rather than to cut them down and replace them, she pointed out. Hobbs said we need to proactively protect mature, healthy trees. We will continue to lose trees to due natural factors, including climate change and insects. CAK would like to see the Township move forward in a few ways: Measure the current tree canopy and the social, environmental and intrinsic value of King's trees. Make tree preservation a key feature of King's Climate Change Action Plan. Commit to increasing total tree canopy to meet or exceed York Region's targets. Adopt a private tree by-law and protect mature trees on public and private property. We believe a private tree bylaw is an important part of this solution, she said. Resident Susan Beharriell pointed out the world has changed, and King must change with it. Staff is moving from processes and a culture that were largely re-active regarding trees, to a system that is very pro-active and is now responsible for planting, maintaining and increasing King's tree canopy. She praised staff for the work they put into the plan. She was, however, surprised to see that the public has been somewhat left out of the process. She mentioned the purpose of the plan clearly states that it is to provide methods to protect trees. She would like to see specific mention of King's present canopy, and strategies for meeting/surpassing expectations. One flaw, she said is a lack of a plan on private trees. The plan states that it directs staff what to do with public trees. However, it absolves staff of all responsibilities for private trees. This is not the way to increase King's canopy and should be reconsidered, she said. The people of King have no idea how we are doing with our canopy now, how we are going to measure it into the future and track success or problems, how we will know how well any strategies are working, or how to improve them. This plan contains nothing about regular reporting to Council and the residents about how King's treasured trees are faring. I suggest that this new responsibility be added soon so that the new plan can start to improve King's trees. Councillor Debbie Schaefer suggested council may need to revisit the private tree bylaw. Mayor Steve Pellegrini said he wanted to get this draft plan out of the way, before opening up another debate on the private tree bylaw. He didn't want to saddle staff with another task at this point in the council term. He did point out that, along with King's plan, trees are also regulated by York Regional bylaws, conservation authorities and heritage guidelines. He said King has to be realistic in its plans, without telling residents what to do on their own properties. J. Bruce Craig, of the Concerned Citizens of King Township submitted comments to staff, nothing they advocate for conserving King Township's trees and forests and enhancing the tree canopy in both rural and urban areas of the Township. CCKT noted a majority of King Township's trees and forests are found on private lands, and yet aside from York Region's role in regulating and managing trees in woodlots and forests greater than 0.2 ha, the Township has virtually no role in managing trees on private lands outside of development applications and new subdivision plans. He said residents all over King Township witness and see the removal of healthy mature trees in both the urban and rural areas often changing the character of a street or neighbourhood. This has a significant impact on the Township goal of increasing the tree canopy. Science clearly shows that young replacement trees cannot do the heavy lifting and bring the level of benefit received from larger healthy trees. CCKT believes it is vital to protect and conserve the vast majority of mature trees on private lands in meeting the goal of growing the overall tree canopy for King. We strongly recommend that King Township take action to establish suitable regulations for the protection and management of trees on private lands which will compliment the Township's Tree Management Plan. CCKT recognizes that there needs to be insightful community input from all sectors of the King community with a focus on achieving an effective approach and effective Private Tree Preservation Plan that will help ensure that King's tree canopy grows in the coming years and decades. As has been highlighted in earlier staff reports, a successful plan will very likely include a combination of education, tree maintenance and planting programs and regulations that are well tailored to different parts of the Settlement Areas (urban) and the rural areas, including agricultural lands. CCKT sees the King Municipal Tree Management Plan as an excellent step forward and hopes that this Plan, with its many positive features, will provide the basis for a more comprehensive Township-wide plan which will address the very evident need to protect and preserve mature trees on private lands.