

\$3 million set aside to buy sensitive land

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Environmental significance, a clear benefit to the public and the financial bottom line will be the guiding principles behind the Town of Markham's new Environmental Land Acquisition Fund.

The fund, dubbed ELAF, stands at \$2.9 million and was created last year to help the town buy important greenland properties and key natural areas threatened by development.

A second fund was also formalized by council earlier this month. The Environmental Sustainability Fund, which currently stands at \$302,611, will be used to help support smaller environmental projects or programs that contribute to the health of natural areas.

Tree planting, creek and waterway restoration and pesticide reduction are the kinds of town or community-based projects that could warrant financial support from the fund, said Ward 2 Councillor Erin Shapero.

"This fund is a way for the town, corporations and community groups to improve the environment in simple ways," she explained.

One local environmentalist said the idea is "fabulous" and offered congratulations to the town for moving it forward.

"It does seem weird to be praising the town," admitted Save the Rouge Valley Systems president Glenn De Baeremaeker.

"But overall both funds are fabulous and are desperately needed. The Town of Markham only has two per cent forest cover — anything that plants more trees and shrubs to clean the air we breathe and increases our greenspace is absolutely essential."

And while he estimated \$60 to \$70 million is needed to acquire development-threatened lands along the Rouge and Don rivers, Mr. De Baeremaeker called council's commitment to support the fund each year through its capital budget a step in the right direction.

"The Town of Markham spends \$110 million in capital projects every year. Over 10 years, \$60 million may seem a lot of taxpayer money but it's not to the town."

"And no one is outraged that there are too many parks in Markham — people are always grateful for greenspace and this is a gift that will last long after these politicians are retired."

"We need to invest in greenspace as well as in roads and sewers, and we pay for those."

Councillor Shapero agrees.

"We have to start protecting our green infrastructure," she said. "Forests provide us with clean air, rivers with clean water, wetlands filter our water. We must invest in all of these areas — we can invest in gray infrastructure all we want, but that's not what sustains us."

Council has approved strict, three-stage evaluation criteria any land purchase must undergo, administered by a committee of councillors and staff from the planning, legal and real property departments.

The first part of the evaluation is a general, but detailed, screening process to ensure the land meets the intent of the fund — that, among other things, it is environmentally valuable; it can't be secured through other means such as easements, leases or donation; that there is some immediate threat to the land; and that the availability of other

funding partners has been investigated.

The land must also contain significant natural heritage features, contribute to the town's greenway system by acting as a link, and could be a part of a larger protection framework like the Rouge Park.

Once past stage one, the property would then pass through a weighting system consisting of natural, aesthetic and cultural considerations as well as the level of urgency involved.



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