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INSIDE AURORA: Cutting our losses

By Scott Johnston

I think it's time Aurora admitted defeat and cut its losses.
Actually, cut down its losses may be a more apt description, as I'm talking about our municipality's war on the Emerald Ash Borer.
This small green beetle is native to northeastern Asia, where it lives in a healthy balance with its native ecosystem.
However, when some beetles hitched a ride to the US about 20 years ago they found a wealth of ash trees to feed on, and unlike at home, not many predators keen to make them stop.
Once these insects descend on a tree, it will be dead in three years.
Since their detection in Michigan in 2002, they have munched their way rapidly across the central and eastern US and into Canada.
The first one was found in Aurora 2011. Although there was only one, the Town saw the writing on the wall, and was spurred into action.
It had a number of options, but they generally boiled down to two choices: fight, using chemical weaponry, or give up, and preemptively remove the ashes and replace them with something less tasty.
For many years, ashes were one of the only half dozen or so trees planted on boulevards in Aurora. Although a wider diversity of trees (42 different species at last count) are now planted, based on its historically preferred status, in 2011 Aurora had over 2,700 publicly-owned ashes along its streets, and in its parks.
A lot of time and effort had been put into maturing this part of our Town's leafy canopy, so in 2012 Council approved the use of a chemical treatment called TreeAzin.
This insecticide is injected into the trunk, just above the ground. From there, it travels up into the rest of the tree where, with luck, it kills the borers at different stages of their lifecycles.
At first this application took place every two years, but this later was accelerated to every year.
I've actually has a front row seat to this process, as the boulevard on our entire street hosts a monoculture of ash trees.
We had a technician around our street just the past week to do the annual injection. When asked how things were going in staving off the borer, he glanced over at a nearby ash with several dead branches in its crown and noted ?that one's got ?em?.
So, if the emerald ash borer has a multi-legged foothold on our street, and others in our area, based on casual observation, how well is the Aurora-wide effort going?
According to statistics released by the Town last year, pretty much all of the untreated ash trees in local woodlots are now dead.
While the treated trees are doing better, well over 500 have been removed in the past five years due to rapid decline.
Although the Town states that treatment has been ?generally successful?, losing an average of almost 5 per cent a year, despite spending over $200k annually in treatment sounds a bit like this campaign is more on the ?generally unsuccessful? side.
This might also explain why TreeAzin treatments have been described elsewhere as more of a delaying tactic, than a cure.
With potentially multiple years of $200k+ treatments still ahead, and continued losses likely, I think it's time the Town started accelerating the replacement process. Let's identify some especially healthy or resilient ashes, nice specimen trees, or ones with historical interest that we should save, and focus on protecting those.
As for the rest, starting with the obviously weakened trees, let's divert some of the chemical treatment budget to replacing them with a variety of the 42 other options, many of which are available from the Town's own nursery stock.
It'll be sad to see all the ashes go, but like the elms decimated in the last century by Dutch Elm disease, a few hardy specimens will likely live on.
Hats off to the Town for giving it it's best effort to combat the emerald ash borer, and it was worth a try. But in the end, it's inevitably going to be a losing effort, so I think it's time to cut out losses, look to the future, and move on.

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