

Council gives snow plow contracts, costs a frosty reception

By Brock Weir

Snow itself is a Canadian inevitability but removing snow in Aurora evidently is not.

Council voted to delay a decision on new contracts for local snow plowing on roadways and sidewalks, which would lock the Town in a series of seven year contracts, with a degree of uncertainty over what it will ultimately cost Aurora in the end.

Recommendations from Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, called on Council to increase its winter maintenance budget by \$225,000 to cope with snowfall expected to close out 2014. This came with a recommendation to award Forest Ridge Landscaping a seven year contract for sidewalk plowing services at \$322,000 for the 2014/2015 season, as well as a road plowing contract to Femar Paving Limited at \$341,200 for the upcoming season, and giving him the ability to renew the contracts for up to six years pending an annual analysis and satisfactory performance review.

According to Mr. Simanovskis, the recommendation for seven year contracts stems from the life expectancy of vehicles and other implements which will be purchased by the contractor to provide the services.

"We are trying to maximize the life that we get out of that asset the contractor is buying on our behalf," he said. "If it is a four-year term, there is a lot of reluctance to get new vehicles because they are not going to get the full life of this vehicle under this contract. If it is longer than seven years, you get a vehicle that is too old to operate beyond that time period effectively."

Although Councillor Michael Thompson said he was fully in support of improving the quality of plowing, particularly when it comes to sidewalks, he said he was not satisfied by what he saw as a lack of funding options to minimize a potential hit on the taxpayer.

"I would have liked to have seen us implement some of the things we discussed through the service level review we undertook last year, where we looked at mandatory and discretionary services and bringing some of those forward," said Councillor Thompson. "I think it is important to start looking at that going forward that if we identify services that we want to enhance or increase, and we consider them core, it would be nice to have options or alternatives brought within the report where other services may be looked at as a means to offset the cost of increasing the service here."

"It is not always a case of just passing the costs onto the consumer and, in this case, the taxpayer."

Councillor John Gallo expressed a similar view, stating he believed this represented a "significant service level increase" by taking snow plowing away from the responsibility of Town Staff to outside contractors.

"I would have wished we spent a little more time on discussing this and really understanding the need to do this, to understand the significant service level increase and, within a one week span, we make these decisions," he said. "To me, this is pretty significant and I hazard to guess that very few people are aware of it. I will be spending the week analysing it to a greater degree and hopefully coming up with some better ideas or a better path to take."

As Aurora nears build-out with the development of the 2C Lands, now underway, more areas to plow could soon mean further costs as well, added Mr. Simanovskis, responding to questions from Councillor John Abel asking whether or not further kilometers of roads in the near future had factored into rising costs. Mr. Simanovskis said the contracts had been set up based on nine distinct service areas and once 2C is complete, there would be a tenth to address.

"We would be coming back to Council looking for a tenth vehicle, whether that is in-house, or contracted out," he said. "That will probably be in the next two or three years, depending on how that is built out."

Currently, he added, there are five in-house vehicles and four contract vehicles for road maintenance.

?One of the primary shifts in trying to achieve service levels is trying to shift sidewalk operations entirely to contract service because what was happening previously is we would use our staff to follow with sidewalk cleaning operations once the roads are done. You would have a six to 10 hour delay which impacts service levels.?