

Council sends tree bylaw back to the drawing board



By Brock Weir

It's back to the drawing board for Aurora's tree protection bylaw.

Council scrapped changes made the previous week which would have placed tighter restriction on tree removal on golf courses as well as within heritage districts after coming to a deadlock on many of the items up on the table.

Coming in from the previous General Committee meeting, Council was due to approve new measures which would limit golf courses to removing 10 trees per year on an average sized golf course without requiring a permit, whereas golf courses are completely exempt from current tree protection legislation at the municipal level.

The proposed changes would have also provided an extra safety net on the number of trees that could be removed without a property from the average Aurora home within a 12 month period to two trees, where the bylaw currently stands at four. The changes would have also made homeowners in Heritage Districts subject to the same restrictions as everyone in Town, and governed how many trees can be removed on larger lot properties.

By the time these revisions came up for Council approval this week, Councillors began shooting holes in each of the provisions approved at the Committee level.

‘There is not even close to a consensus around the table about any of these motions,’ said Councillor Michael Thompson after nearly an hour of debate and a brief recess to clear up confusion around the table on just what was transpiring. ‘These motions are all over the place and these options are just going to keep coming.’

A motion to send the entire draft tree bylaw back to a review by municipal staff eventually nipped discussion in the bud upon approval.

Among the many motions and revisions to come forward, most contentious were restrictions on trees in heritage areas and on golf courses.

‘I don't believe our heritage district should be treated the same way as all other properties to allow for the removal of two trees of any size on heritage properties within a 12 month period,’ argued Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

This was an argument bolstered by Councillor Sandra Humfries.

'Heritage Districts are treated differently as we address the properties themselves,' she said. 'I also believe that trees in this area need to be addressed in the same manner.'

According to Al Downey, Director of Parks and Recreation, the recommendation to put restrictions on trees in heritage areas stemmed from concerns from the Town's heritage planner to ensure focus was put on larger trees within the area's designated boundaries.

'We're trying to make it as much of a Made in Aurora bylaw as possible and we thought adding an additional level of scrutiny with regards to heritage trees. Trees in the heritage area are fairly substantial so when you lose one, it has a greater impact on the community than in some of our other areas.'

Speaking against special provisions for the heritage area, was Councillor John Abel who said it was 'unfair' that heritage homeowners would be subject to more stringent restrictions than homeowners elsewhere.

Councillor Abel was also one of the strongest voices the previous week against placing any restrictions on golf courses, a position he maintained last week.

'What this is, in my mind, is a restriction put on selectively through our town by a group that were appalled by the number of trees cut down [at Beacon Hall in 2012],' he said, noting some might see anyone opposing these restrictions as anti-tree and that is not the case. 'If you are earnest about this, [it should apply] to all businesses. Don't favour certain areas and restrict other ones.'

'This is almost like an inquisition. If you don't go along with these restrictions that have been arbitrarily put down then you are against trees and that will come back to haunt you in an election. It has been like that since day one and I think we have always cherished the trees in this Town. I recognize the responsible rights of our citizens and I don't think we need to vote for more restrictions.'

For Councillor Thompson, he viewed his opposition to golf course provisions in the tree bylaw along practical lines.

'If you do the calculation, the owners of a large residential property can actually chop down more trees than a golf course over the course of 12 months,' he said.

After questioning Mr. Downey on the number of tree removal permits that were issued by the Town of Aurora last year, and being told the number was in the single digits, Councillor Evelyn Buck argued that the tree protection bylaw 'means nothing' to the average citizen.

'It puts too many restrictions on people who are fortunate enough to live in a heritage district,' she said. '[With the golf courses] we are putting in a bylaw trying to circumvent the authority of the Region. The lower down the scale we go the less authority you have. I don't think this aspect of the bylaw will be worth anything at all.'