

Emerald Ash Borer treatment could see u-turn in Aurora

By Brock Weir

Should Aurora treat the ash trees lining streets with a more expensive, less controversial chemical to fight the deadly Emerald Ash Borer, or spend a bit more money and replace trees impacted by the bug sooner rather than later?

That is the question Council will grapple with this week as it mulls options on how best to combat the Emerald Ash Borer, the invasive species that has continued its spread throughout Southern Ontario with the potential to destroy every untreated ash tree in its wake.

Last May, Council approved continuing to treat the 2,378 remaining ash trees in Aurora parks and lining streets to fight against the borer with the chemical TreeAzin, which is derived from the Neem tree, a process which has been proving successful. Council selected that treatment over the more controversial IMA-jet, a neonicotinoid amid concerns over the impact it might have on the surrounding environment, be it in leaves or soil.

Now that the manufacturers of TreeAzin are recommending their product be used annually over the previously agreed biennial treatments, however, Aurora staff have recommended moving ahead with the less costly IMA-jet after Health Canada found its use not to be a major concern if injected directly into tree trunks.

‘They have concluded that while they continue to do investigations on its use in several different applications, it is no longer a concern [when] applied as a tree trunk injection,’ said Al Downey, Aurora’s Director of Parks and Recreation, last week. ‘It is also not a concern when used as a product for flea, tick and lice treatment for cats and dogs.’

Council members, however, remained uneasy with the proposal as, despite Health Canada’s assurance the treatment is fine in this particular application, concerns remain for other application.

‘In all fairness, I believe they are not as concerned, or they are probably still going to approve the use of the product when you’re injecting it into a tree trunk, but I still have an issue using a product that, for the most part, is going to be banned from most uses due to the concerns being raised,’ said Councillor Michael Thompson.

A similar view was offered by Mayor Geoff Dawe, who said he wanted more time between last week’s General Committee meeting and this week’s Council session to consider the matter.

‘At this point, I am not sure I can support it simply because of some of the concerns that have been expressed,’ he said.

Concerns were also voiced by Councillor Tom Mrakas, who questioned the impacts a treated tree might have on the environment if it does succumb to the Emerald Ash Borer and is ultimately removed, chipped, and used in other areas.

‘Are those chips really safe?’ questioned Councillor Mrakas. ‘I don’t think they have answered those concerns good enough for me to say, ‘Let’s continue to use IMA-jet. I know they are saying it is safe when you inject it into the tree, but when you’re getting treatment and something is put into your body, it is running through your whole body. It is running through your veins. It is getting into leaves and it is getting into everything so you could have cross-contamination. What about bugs and insects munching on those leaves? Those concerns haven’t been answered fully.’

Weighing his options at the Committee table was Councillor John Abel, who said it is important to evaluate this alongside the importance of protecting the tree canopy. There are a lot of unknowns in dealing with invasive species, so communities taking the initiative to fight the bugs are ‘pioneers’ in the area.

While he said he would be open to using the treatment option Council and residents are most comfortable with, he said he was ‘comfortable’ with the IMA-jet recommendation.

‘I am going with what Health Canada says, I am going with the direction of our director,’ he said. ‘I understand the application is key? if you spray it on our crops, it is devastating. If it’s injected into a tree trunk there is nothing there. Some will argue, right or wrong, that there has to be something up in the trees and the leaves fall [but] it is all relative. What I am pleased to see is the program seems to be saving our canopy and there are streets in our Town that have full, mature 30-year-old ash trees lining both sides.’

Councillor Jeff Thom, on the other hand, questioned whether Aurora is fighting a losing battle. While the manufacturer is recommending a more frequent use of their product, he pointed out that they are also there to sell more product. The increased cost that comes with increased treatment could be a game changer.

‘Replacement of the trees [was the most expensive option in the fight] because the replacement of the trees is quite expensive,’ he said, pondering whether this treatment will be indefinite. ‘We’re looking at four-year outlooks. If we’re going to have to do this for 10 or 15 years, it is hard to say how long we are going to treat those ash trees.’

?For me, we have to think about spending hundreds of thousands of dollars over a decade or more injecting these trees, I think that should be a consideration. Perhaps we could look at letting them run their course naturally and look at replanting. This is a real tough one. My preference would be to maintain our treatment of TreeAzin on a biannual basis and that way we can mitigate some of the costs as opposed to going year to year for the foreseeable future.?