

?Improved? snow clearing services targeted for the season ahead

By Brock Weir

In the dying days of summer, few people want to think ahead to when the snow flies ? but if you're worried that driving around on messy roads will be as big a challenge this winter than it was on the last, take a moment to read on.

Aurora is set to ramp up resources on snow removal following an analysis of the shortfalls ? and the numerous complaints associated with the service shortfalls ? that ramped up over the previous season.

?It has been determined that there were two separate occasions during the mid and late winter period where there were some operational issues and circumstances that influenced the operational response to these significant storm events,? said Jim Tree, Aurora's Acting Manager of Operations, in his report before Council members last week. ?As a result, Council is aware that there was significant negative feedback from our residents concerned with the Town's performance in responding to and effectively managing this event and the associated forces in this regard.?

Much of this poor performance is chalked up to behind-the-scenes managerial changes and ?related events? that caused a hit on operations. Compounding the problem, three plows and sanders were out of commission at various points in the winter, as well as staffing shortfalls.

?It has been determined that despite the fact our winter maintenance staff resources are marginally lower than our neighbouring municipalities that, with some changes on how we deploy these staff, our current staff complement are generally capable of meeting the needs. It has been determined through our review of the operation and discussions with all operations staff that [crew leaders not being assigned to operate plows] is not conducive to an efficient operation and, as such, this practice has been discontinued. This will result in the addition of four staff back into the winter maintenance operation and an immediate gain in available operators.?

Changes include assigning a 24/7 road patrol to monitor road conditions and call out staff as required, whereas the current process has less experienced staff on the afternoon shift and no staff assigned to patrol Friday night through Sunday. Three additional parks department operators will be placed on standby for winter responses, and a further standby rotation.

These changes were welcomed by Council members last week, who said they were pleased existing staff resources would be used to better address winter issues.

?I was really pleased to see the use of Parks staff and rolling them into some of those maintenance functions, which I think will help us get out sooner and perhaps a longer day in those cases when they are needed,? said Mayor Geoff Dawe.

Councillor Michael Thompson said he too was pleased with the report ?overall? but said he was ?concerned? the report focused so much on roads while Councillors fielded a number of residents' complaints over sidewalks.

?I know it is being contracted out, but what can we do to ensure that the standards we have in place for the sidewalks are being met?? he asked. ?There were a number of complaints we received that the work was not meeting those standards in certain areas of Town when it came to clearing out the sidewalks. For myself, there were huge swaths of sidewalk where you could question whether they had actually been cleaned or not last year.?

Responding to the question, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said staff were ?not at all pleased? with the performance of the sidewalk contractor last year and have worked ?very hard? in driving this message home to them.

The contractor, he said, is fully aware that Aurora was ?not happy with their performance? and they must be better.

?With regards to sidewalk areas not being cleared, one of our concerns that this report has addressed is we don't have enough eyes out there to determine what has or what hasn't been done,? said Mr. Downey. ?I thought Mr. Tree had done an excellent job in identifying that issue and addressing that issue so that we can now go out and not necessarily trust the computer programs that we have or the schedules that we have got, we actually need people out there to actually see that those areas have been cleared and they have been cleared satisfactorily.?

For Councillor Tom Mrakas, the proposed changes outlined in the report speaks to the efficiencies Council had been asking for when it comes to winter maintenance, particularly relying more on the eyes of the front-line workers who are actually out on the roads.

?Even though we're not changing the numbers on the service levels I believe that this will allow us to provide a better service for our residents at the same price and I think that is what we always strive to do,? he said. ?This is going to get us to that point. I am looking forward to the season and seeing how we deal with the winter. I think we will do a better job and the residents will be [happier] with the service the Town provides.?

In the end, however, it is all about performance.

Councillor Harold Kim said it was "disconcerting" to read that there were four staff in Operations "who believe they are all crew leaders" in one place.

"You look at each other and you're all guiding traffic and it is kind of disappointing," said Councillor Kim. "I hope there is some accountability in the Centre with those staff members. It is always nice to have metrics in what operational efficiencies we have achieved."