

Privacy and environment dominate Aurora's trash talks



(Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Environmental Services, discusses the proposed Clear Bag program with resident Peter Wolfendale. Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Privacy issues were tempered with concerns over the environment as a steady stream of residents and politicians flowed into Town Hall on Monday night to weigh in on Aurora's proposed clear bag garbage program.

Municipal staff hope to get the program, which would see area residents making the switch to clear plastic garbage bags rather than the more conventional black bags, off the ground this spring in a "soft launch" before the program becomes mandatory in the fall.

If passed by Council, phase one, which would see voluntary participation in the program, would be launched in early June, with mandatory participation coming into force in October. The intent of the program, according to proponents, is to ensure waste that should not be in the garbage stream "ranging from toxic items such as paint cans to simply recyclable material" are diverted into the proper channel, with an ultimate cost savings to the Town.

Since the program was first floated during the last term of Council, the proposal triggered a wide range of opposition from the community, but Monday's meeting indicated this opposition was coupled with cautious enthusiasm.

"I am totally for recycling [but I am against the clear bags] because I don't think it is any garbage man's business," said resident Jo-ann Spitzer.

Ms. Spitzer echoed the concerns of many residents over privacy on what one throws into their curbside trash. This was a concern shared by Joel and Margaret Sussman, who said their worries were soothed by the provision residents can use several opaque grocery bags within their clear bags.

"It seems like [the idea] is coming from a good place, but I don't know if everything was thought through," said Margaret, questioning who residents would turn to and complain if their garbage is ultimately inspected by the collectors and left on the curb.

"We're not worried about the personal things " we don't have anything to hide," added Rhonda Sanders with a chuckle. She and her husband, John, attended the meeting with several questions rather than to sound off for or against the plan. Among their questions was whether big garbage containers could still be used in the system (they can) and, like the Sussmans, where to go if there is a dispute with the collector.

?If the garbage man comes along and puts a tag on it, what do you do with it?? he asked. ?Do you put it at your neighbour's and try again, or what? You should be able to call the Town and say you got this and have them look at the bag [to see] there is nothing there.?

Helping to answer many of these questions was Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental services. Many of the questions received on Monday were ones that have come in throughout the campaign, dominated primarily by the privacy concerns, cost, and the transition itself.

?I think what I am getting out of tonight's conversation is we're on the right track,? he said. ?I think the idea of unlimited grocery bags is really good. My goal going forward with this program is to make it as painless for the community as possible. All we're trying to do is create more awareness around where the materials need to go and the clear bag creates a little more consciousness around how you manage your waste.

?We're anticipating some cost savings in the long run based on Markham's experience and our primary goal is doing the right thing for the environment. We're talking about increasing our diversion rates by upwards of 10 per cent and that is really at no cost to the Town.?

Nothing, however, can be done without the greenlight from Council and Mayor Geoff Dawe, along with several Councillors, were on hand to hear their concerns. While some said they were fully on board with the project, others hoped to learn more before making their final decision.

?I am still in favour of it and still think it is the way to go,? said Mayor Dawe. ?[In terms of] dollars and cents, landfill is the cheapest way to go and, from that perspective, it is the cheapest alternative. From a long-term environmental perspective, it is the most expensive thing we can do. I think we owe it to our future generations to handle our waste in a responsible manner. It sounds a little Pollyanna-ish, but that is what I think.

?I think the toughest sell will be getting those people who are adamantly against it to use it. Whether or not we're going to implement it, we'll get the feedback from this meeting, the feedback from our online survey and see how that might go.?

Mayor Dawe added one alternative on the backburner would be a different kind of soft launch in one particular undetermined part of Town that would act as a pilot area for the program.

Councillor John Abel, on the other hand, said he was ready to follow the lead of Markham with this program. While residents had concerns about privacy and costs, it all comes down to education, he added.

Other Councillors, such as Wendy Gaertner, Tom Mrakas and Jeff Thom, had more questions before they decided whether or not they would be on board. Councillor Gaertner, in particular, echoed the view that residents need to have someone to turn to if they have a dispute over whether their garbage should have been collected.

?That is going to be a big problem unless residents have someone to go to when they are upset,? she said. ?That is a concern I am hearing from the residents and I think it is justified.?