

Residents could decide future of end-of-driveway clearing program

By Brock Weir

Residents should have the opportunity to weigh in on whether or not Aurora should proceed with a windrow clearing program, according to some Councillors, after lawmakers gave the costly proposal a mixed review last week.

As The Auroran reported last week, Council is due to consider the future of a possible program that would make the snow and ice that accumulates at the end of your driveway after a snow plow passes a thing of the past ? but it's a program that comes with a price. According to Jim Tree, Aurora's acting manager of roads and water, it will cost the Town upwards of \$1.5 million each year to clear the estimated 18,900 private driveways in Aurora, and this figure does not include the cost to purchase special equipment required to make it happen.

Council was divided on whether or not the program had merit, with some arguing it was too costly and others noting that, when that \$1.5 million is divided between the 18,900 homes, residents might find it good value for money.

?When they were looking at this in Vaughan, the cost to the municipality in 2016 was \$2.65 million, and that would lead to a property tax increase of 2.8 per cent or an annual cost of \$43.75 for what I think is probably the average home price in 2016,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?It sounds like a lot of money, and it sounds like a huge increase, but if you take it down to what it actually costs the taxpayer, if it is going to cost them an annual cost of \$44, it doesn't seem very onerous.?

While Councillor Michael Thompson said his breakdown showed that the \$1.5 million would turn out to be in the neighbourhood of \$80 a home, he was not enthusiastic about the program, citing concerns about the turnaround time between a snow event and when windrows might be clear, an issue that was identified when Vaughan took the plunge and adopted a windrow clearing program.

?There is a time delay and I know the few times I have been in conversations with other Councillors there that I think there is a 24 hour lag or something,? he said, adding that if Aurora adopted a windrow clearing program it is important to manage residents' expectations on just what they will be getting. ?We have to be cautious of setting expectations should we choose to proceed.

Personally, I don't think it is worth it.?

This was the prevailing sentiment with the majority of Council members who spoke to the item at last week's General Committee meeting.

Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, said it is ?painful? coming home from work at the end of the day to find ?three feet of ice? accumulated at the end of his driveway, but a \$1.5 million price tag to reduce the pain he shares with other residents could cause ?more of a headache.?

?My concern is this would be a huge impact on seniors as far as the cost,? added Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ?There is a high population of seniors who are living in condos [as well] and to stipulate this added extra cost would be even more expensive. I really have concerns about this added cost.?

But Councillor Gaertner was of the position that a full public survey should be conducted before Council decides whether or not to put the windrow clearing idea permanently on ice.

?If we're going to go out to residents and say this is going to cost you an extra \$50 to your tax bill if we do windrow clearing, my guess is that almost everybody would say yes,? she said. ?If you put this to me, I would certainly pay \$50 to try and deal with the windrows. I lived on Murray Drive and that was a hard job and the population is aging.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas, however, was more cautious about a public survey.

?I am not opposed to going out to public consultation, but my concern with that is?with something like this, depending on when you do it, if you do it when it is snowing outside, most people?would say, ?Yeah, I don't mind paying a little bit extra for [that] and come by and do this for me,? he said, referring to people being asked the question after completing the arduous task of clearing their own windrow. ?If you did this over the summer and say, ?Do you want us to raise your taxes and we'll clear the end of your driveway?' They're going to say no. I think there is an issue with when we do the public consultation.?

Councillor Kim had a similar view, noting, ?I think we should be cautious if we put this out to the public because given Aurora has a higher leaning towards seniors, and I am not saying that is a bad thing, [but] if you have put in a fair survey you're going to have a certain segment of the population that is voting a certain way and it is going to be very biased. Demographics will skew the public vote and I think we should take note of that.?

This is not the first time Aurora has looked at windrow clearing. Council took on a pilot project eleven years ago targeted at seniors and residents living with physical challenges. The program, said Al Downey, Director of Operations, was less than a resounding success. In the winter of 2008 and 2009, only five winter events required windrow service and, he said, it took staff five times longer

to administer than to deliver the program.

Looking ahead, Mr. Downey outlined a number of operational concerns for Council to consider before the possibility of adopting a new program. Such a program would require two separate pieces of equipment, rather than equipping existing snow plows with windrow clearing implements because windrow clearing would make road clearing slow down to a ?crawl.?

Green for Life, Aurora's waste management contractor, is also unwilling to have their workers go beyond the curbside to pick up trash and recycling that would be moved further towards the house to clear the way for windrow plows.