

Snow contracts approved by Council last week amid drive to get things done before election

By Brock Weir

Not wanting to get anywhere close to leaving Aurora residents high and (mostly) dry this fall and into the winter, Council signed off on new contracts last week to outsource snow plowing on local roads and sidewalks.

The move reversed a decision made the previous week at the Committee level to delay the vote until a Council meeting later this month pending further information. They reversed the delay after concerns Council would be in a 'lame duck' position, depending on the number of incumbent Councillors seeking re-election, which would have strictly limited the kinds of things the current Council can green light.

'When Council made this decision [last week] I was pretty upset because we could go into lame duck council,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'If we defer this [and go into lame duck] we would have no money for snow removal for [the fall]. We can't do that to the community. Well, we can if you want, but I really think [we should] support the staff recommendation.'

When Council initially voted to delay the decision, some Councillors expressed a variety of concerns with what was before them, particularly whether the new contracts to outsource the services, which are currently largely done by in-house staff, would actually be a service increase to Aurora residents and taxpayers, an issue which has come under increasing scrutiny in recent weeks amid a service level review at Town Hall.

Staff recommended increasing its winter maintenance budget by \$225,000 to cope with snowfall expected to close out 2014. This was coupled with recommendations to award Forest Ridge Landscaping a seven year contract for sidewalk plowing services at \$322,000 for the 2014/2015 season, as well as a road plowing contract to Femar Paving Limited at \$341,200 for the upcoming season, and giving the department the ability to renew the contracts for up to six years, 'pending an annual analysis and satisfactory performance review.'

Although Council ultimately voted for the recommendation, there was still some uneasiness.

'We have constructed hundreds of additional feet of sidewalks this year,' said Councillor Evelyn Buck. 'Obviously we are going to be plowing the snow off those hundreds of feet of sidewalk. Obviously that is going to cost more money than we spent the year before. It is, in fact, an increased level of service.'

Councillor John Gallo said he agreed with Councillor Buck's assessment, noting that work on the sidewalks is currently done by municipal staff.

'What we are proposing here is to contract that service out, hence the contract, hence the cost within seven years of some \$2.1 million,' he said.

'We don't currently have a contract that does our sidewalks, we have internal staff that do it. Internal staff are now going to be redeployed to do other work that we're either currently not doing, or doing later on in the whole program of clearing snow.'

Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, however, said this was not strictly the case. It was always the intent of his department to do sidewalks, but over the last three years or so, they have had to continually rely on contract workers to get the job done, due to volume. This is additional work that they have been paying for indirectly as part of their budget.

'Even with that level of service, the staff are still consuming all their available operation hours with regards to maintaining the roads as they are,' said Mr. Simanovskis. 'When it is internal staff we have to finish the roads first because we don't have enough bodies

to do it at the same time. With a contracted resource, we have some flexibility to do the sidewalks a little bit sooner, it just depends on the severity of the storm and the availability of the staff because their sidewalk support was a secondary service.?

This argument was bolstered by Techa Van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Bylaw Services, who said, in response to questions from Councillor Gallo, Town Hall did receive ?a lot of calls? from residents looking for speedier sidewalk clearing.

Councillor Gallo was undeterred, however, saying he believed it is, at the end of the day, ?a \$2.1 million service level increase? which might be justifiable, but he still had questions. Councillor Michael Thompson, on the other hand, said it was definitely a service level increase, but one that would be for the greater good.

?To me, from a residents' perception, that is an enhancement, that is a service level improvement,? said Councillor Michael Thomson of avoiding a delay in sidewalk clearing. ?I see it as a core function for the Town. This is what we do.?