

Snow dump delayed as Council seeks alternatives to Lambert Willson site

By Brock Weir

Aurora's long-gestating snow dump will have to cool its heels for a little while longer after Council voted to delay making a decision on whether or not it will become a reality.

The delay likely means there won't be any further clarity on the issue before the snow starts flying once again this year, but Councillors argue there is still more information to consider before taking the plunge.

Going into this month's Council meeting, members faced a recommendation to proceed with the nearly \$800,000 snow dumping facility at Lambert Willson Park, after it was split off as a separate item from the larger-scale Joint Operations Centre (JOC). The JOC, which was approved at the same meeting, is slated to be constructed on Industrial Parkway just north of Lambert Willson Park.

According to Town Staff, the purpose of a specially created snow dump facility in the park would have multiple benefits to the community and the surrounding watershed area. When constructed, it would allow contaminants to be filtered out of the melting water before it hits the watershed and, in particular, the wellhead protection area, as well as provide measures for ensuring salt used to melt ice and snow does not find its way into the surrounding environment.

Some Councillors, however, said they were unconvinced of the benefits of such a program and wanted more time to look at alternatives, and the project hit a deadlock, falling on a tie vote of 4 ? 4.

?I struggled with this from when I first saw it and have swayed back and forth,? said Councillor John Gallo who, along with Councillors John Abel, Evelyn Buck, and Don Constable voted against the project. ?Recently I visited two municipalities that don't even put salt on their roads for very specific reasons: they are very close to water courses and those municipalities simply avoid that and manage to deal with winters that are even more severe than ours.

?Is it money better spent to figure out how to deal with what we put on our roads so we don't have this problem to deal with? I am leaning far more towards that than to build facilities to deal with a problem. I am not convinced this is the best approach to deal with the issue.?

Councillor John Abel said he too would like to see alternatives explored. As snow dumped in this facility often comes from highly congested corridors like Yonge Street and Wellington Street, it accounts for a very small sliver of Aurora's overall snowfall, he argued.

?I would like to see a snow melter brought into the conversation, one that we can rent out to other municipalities that have very small areas, shopping centres where the piles are big and they lose a lot of parking and deal with it in this manner rather than pile snow next to our arboretum and trying to deal with the runoff from there.?

While Councillor Constable said he agreed that there might someday be further environmental issues that might need to be addressed through snow disposal, there was not enough information in the report before Council on alternatives to satisfy him.

In addressing some of the concerns put forward at the meeting, Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, said alternatives had been looked at but some missed the mark. Alternatives such as a snow melter that would travel the roads melting snow on board before dumping the water into storm sewers, were evaluated for their impacts but didn't make the grade.

?[A snow dump] doesn't require fossil fuel to actually perform the function,? said Mr. Simanovskis. ?It is the cost of moving the snow, which is actually a lot cheaper than bringing it from freezing to melting temperatures in large volumes. The capital cost is obviously a lot cheaper but, in the long-term operating and environmental impact from CO2 contributions just doesn't seem like the right thing to do, but it is still a very viable option. From an emissions perspective, it is something that didn't rate very high.?

Risk, however, was one factor which had significant pull with both Mr. Simanovskis' department, and Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, and Councillors Wendy Gaertner, Paul Pirri, and Michael Thompson who voted in favour of moving ahead with the snow dump. This type of facility has been shown as a 'best practice' in other municipalities, added Mr. Simanovskis, and goes a long way towards salt management.

'If there is any risk of groundwater contamination, I think the prudent [thing to do] is move forward with this,' said Councillor Thompson.

Councillor Gaertner said she agreed: 'As a municipality, I would say that we are in the business of risk management and, if this manages risk, this is something I am going to be voting for.'

Although he said he had gone 'back and forth' on the issue, Councillor Paul Pirri said he believed it was 'important' to move forward on this facility.

'For me, even if we did go for a completely salt-free environment that would require we purchase more sand and ultimately a grit separator would be just as useful and needed in those situations as well,' he said. 'I fear if we didn't move forward with this, the Province will recognize this is the direction we need to be going and in four or five years it will end up costing us two or three times as much. I do see it as a risk management piece and we should move forward on it.'

A similar view was expressed by Mayor Dawe.

'We have a very special Town, we have done a lot of work, and Councils have spent a lot of money over the years to ensure, in my opinion, that we keep our Town as clean as possible and I think this just goes along that same line that we do what we can in order to protect our future,' he said. 'I feel this is the responsible thing to do.'