

Advocates argue new rules should be approved without delay

By Brock Weir

The leaves will be gone from the trees by the time Aurora could sign off on a final draft of a proposed new tree protection bylaw, but environmental advocates caution that the earlier any possible windows are closed the better.

Several residents representing a wide cross-section of environmental organizations and green-minded ratepayers came forward to Council last week asking that the draft bylaw be put into action without delay.

One such resident was Isobel Ralston, who lives in a property adjacent to Beacon Hall Golf Course. Ms. Ralston was one of the leading members of Ratepayers of Aurora Yonge South (RAYS) who sounded the alarm on significant cutting and clearing taking place on her neighbourhood course.

Their efforts helped prompt the new bylaw which places golf courses squarely under the umbrella of the tree protection bylaw, whereas courses currently have free reign.

“[Staff] have left no stone unturned with regards to community surveys, private meetings with golf courses, the engagement of residents, information exchanged with Council, the thoughtful and thorough of comparisons of bylaws in other municipalities,” said Ms. Ralston. “Is it perfect? No, nor can it please everyone, but it makes tremendous strides forward allowing for sober second thought on the potential destruction of either single heritage trees or, in the case of golf courses, entire woodlots.

“[In the Beacon Hall case], hundreds of majestic trees were removed every day. We watched logging trucks run off with their harvest. The golf courses could do so legally because they are exempt from the bylaw. As a result, entire woodlots were razed. The revised bylaw will not necessarily prevent the razed woodlots [but] golf courses would have to give justification to the proposed removal of trees. Most importantly, neighbours would be informed of the impending felling plans and would have the opportunity to negotiate with the golf course and make their concerns known to the Town.”

A contributor of RAYS campaign for the Beacon Hall Trees was Susan Walmer. Ms. Walmer heralded Aurora as being a leader in coming forward with a tree bylaw in the first place, although it was far from perfect. For her, passing the bylaw in question would be a step in the right direction.

“[The value the community places] on trees is \$5,400 per hectare per year for [what they provide] to the community,” she said. “Not only are they a symbol of our community, they are also a benefit to us in terms of the long-term health of our communities.

“This bylaw is a valuable tool in the toolbox. I think what it does is force people to stop, pause, and to think about their decision before taking down a healthy tree. It also allows our staff, who are qualified to take a look at the applications, to determine whether that tree should come down or not. It shouldn't just be a rubber stamp.”

As a member of both the Oak Ridges Moraine Land Trust as well as Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee, any further delay to implementing these tree protection measures would be a significant cause for concern, argued Judy Gilchrist.

“I urge Council to consider not delaying the acceptance of the new tree bylaw that has been put before you any further,” she said. “The process has had good input. It has had excellent staff input, it has had a lot of citizen input into it and it is something that a further delay actually opens up a further window of opportunity for other wanton destruction of the trees in this Town.

“We have seen that happen and one of the stronger points in the new tree bylaw is the increased fines to actually reduce the temptation for people to do that.”

At the end of the day, for someone like Ms. Ralston who was very vocal in her opposition to tree cutting on golf courses, the

proposed bylaw hits the right notes.

?Residents ask for a fair measure that involves an approach to tree protection,? she concluded. ?We ask that residents and businesses alike be held accountable to issues that impact all of us, including environmental concerns.?