

Aurora boosts sidewalk maintenance ahead of winter season

Many people don't like to think about the winter ahead in the heat of summer, but local lawmakers are looking ahead to sidewalk maintenance in the year ahead once the snow starts to fly.

Council has approved new service standards for winter sidewalk maintenance, increasing the number of snow clearing and maintenance routes from eight to 10 for the upcoming season, and re-allocating existing stretches to the two new routes.

‘Although the road and sidewalk network has grown by 25 per cent over the last decade, the number of sidewalk machines or routes has not been updated,’ said the Town in a statement, following the last Council meeting before the summer recess. ‘A review shows that Aurora's sidewalk routes are longer than those in other regional municipalities. This new plan will reduce each route to approximately 25 kilometres, allowing established service levels to be met. This change will add \$120,000 to the budget to cover the increased contract.’

In a report to Council by Luigi Colangelo, Aurora's Manager of Public Works, the Town currently maintains more than 250 kilometres of sidewalks, walkways and pathways, all of which were divided into eight routes. Seven of the routes were maintained solely by the Town's contractor and the balance by Town staff and equipment.

‘Aurora's approved service levels for sidewalks and multi-use pathways for winter maintenance is to plow all sidewalks within 24 hours of the end of a snowfall when accumulations reach 5 cm or more,’ he said. ‘This currently exceeds the requirements in the MMS (Minimum Maintenance Standard) which states that snow depths on sidewalks must be reduced to less than 8 cm within 48 hours. The level of service targets approved by Council in 2014 are key defence tools in protecting the Town from claims related to winter sidewalk operations. Road and sidewalk winter management are high-risk areas of operation for the Town. These risks are primarily related to personal injury claims’. To manage the Town's risk, it's important to ‘say what you will do and what you will say.’ When responding to a personal injury claim, one key defence is that the Town has clear and supportable policies and stated service levels in place and that those policies are being delivered to the service level targets.

‘On average, the Town experiences 45 to 50 winter maintenance events each season which require sidewalk plowing and salting. During an event, contracted staff are dispatched and must return the next day for additional cleanup’. [In recent years] the Town's contractor has encountered numerous challenges in adhering to Council-approved service levels of plowing all sidewalks within 24 hours. The expanded and lengthy sidewalk routes have proven difficult to cover and excessively time-consuming within the designated timeframe’. Despite these obstacles, efforts are ongoing to optimize operations to meet Council-approved service levels but continuing to operate in this manner, without additional sidewalk machines going forward, will prove problematic.’

But is this an issue that needs to be resolved by the Town, or is it the responsibility of the contractor to find ways to meet these service levels?

This was a question posed to staff by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo at the most recent meeting.

‘We have a contract with someone, they know the routes, they know our service level. Why does it matter to us if they are having difficulty? The responsibility is theirs to fulfil their obligation on those routes at the prescribed level.’

Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Director of Operational Services, replied that contracted employees are only allowed to drive 13 hours a day per labour laws and those parameters restrict options. There is, she said, also the issue of equipment breakdowns and staffing issues which may not be able to be countered by the Town.

‘I have some difficulty in that,’ replied Councillor Gallo. ‘We have a contract with someone, we pay them, they know how many kilometres they have to do, they know what the service level is, and it's incumbent upon them to have the proper resources in order to fulfil their contractual obligations with us. It shouldn't be upon us to solve their problems. If it is our staff and we're trying to deal

with more kilometres that our staff have to do, and they can't work for whatever reason, it's our responsibility to figure those out. When we have a contract with someone, that's what we pay for. This is within the contract. These are the obligations you have to find. It's not incumbent upon us to figure out solutions to their problem and I feel that's kind of what we're doing here.?

Additional perspective was offered by Town CAO Doug Nadorozny who said another layer of the matter is, per the original contract, contractors secure or purchase equipment to meet demand.

?There is an equipment component that would have to be factored in as well as we take on subdivisions,? said Nadorozny. ?If we keep the number of kilometres per route the same, we have to have the equipment that wouldn't have been in the original contract.?

The change nonetheless won the support of Council.

By Brock Weir