

Aurora could launch 'clear bag' program

By Brock Weir

Ditch your black and green garbage bags, clear bags might soon be the way forward in Aurora – meaning it might be harder for you to covertly (and improperly) get rid of dead batteries and excess paint.

That is the intention of Mayor Geoffrey Dawe who has introduced a Notice of Motion following Markham's lead in eliminating black garbage bags from the Town's waste collection system.

In his motion, Mayor Dawe bills the move as an extension of the municipal and Regional government's drive to 'manage waste and recyclable materials in a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable manner.'

It is also an extension of York Region's Integrated Waste Management Master Plan – better known as the SM4RT Living Plan, which will be formally presented to Aurora in December.

'This master plan identified guiding principles focused on innovation, municipal collaboration, integration and flexibility to adapt emerging trends in waste management,' says Mayor Dawe in his motion. 'Markham recently launched their clear bag program for waste collection, which has seen their material recovery increase by nine to 80 per cent.'

While the motion calls on staff to report back on the ins and outs of bringing a program like this to Aurora, Markham has been seen as basking in the success of the program. The City introduced the program at the end of April, encouraging residents to switch from dark to clear bags to help weed out things that might be going into the waste stream.

Black bags, they say, can hide things like paints and batteries, as well as items which would be better handled through recycling, allowing them to get into the wrong stream.

'Progressive municipalities audit what is in residents' garbage bags to improve waste management practices,' says the City of Markham. 'Recent audits and audits performed by the province indicate high amounts of textiles, paint, household hazardous waste, food, paper, recyclables and thousands and thousands of household batteries are being sent for disposal.'

They also note bags help waste collectors identify banned materials and help prevent collectors from being injured by nails, broken glass, and other sharp materials that might be out of view in dark bags.

Although clear bags are generally within the same price range as darker bags, an added perk Markham has put in place is lifting a previously held limit on three trash bags per household per collection.

This is all part of an extensive waste management strategy being rolled out throughout the Region.

According to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, a presentation is scheduled to the public in Council on December 3. The focus is agreeing among York Region's Northern Six municipalities (Aurora, King, Newmarket, Whitchurch-Stouffville, East Gwillimbury and Georgina) in taking the lead on certain projects.

'There is going to be a new round of public education awareness that the Region will be leading and messaging tailored to each municipality,' says Mr. Simanovskis. 'We are all watching [the clear bag] program with great interest to see what the opportunities are for where we can leverage experiences from other municipalities.'

SM4RT Living focuses on three key areas on waste reduction, including changing behaviour to reduce a demand on services, increasing community waste centres and depots, and forming partnerships throughout the Region of York.

An important focus is also keeping or diverting waste from landfill. They count blue box and green bin programs as very successful throughout the Region in achieving objectives of flipping compostable and recyclable material out of the main waste streams.

All this success, however, comes with a cost, and cost for diversion has escalated steadily, according to Mr. Ramunno. Separating organic waste has been diverted as 'tackling low hanging fruit' but now it is time to step up the game.

Costs for waste diversion in 2005 was estimated at \$129,000 whereas that has ballooned to \$430,000 last year and some of the next issues to tackle are a 'food waste reduction strategy', and an 'Extended Producer Responsibility' which will require producers and manufacturers to manage their product until the end of life by giving manufacturers the incentive to develop green packaging and reducing packaging waste.

'That is a much bigger question and with the changes in extended producer responsibility legislation, the direction is there to actually put more onus on producers to manage their packaging,' said Mr. Simanovskis. 'That legislation is currently in draft form for the province, so that whole discussion happening at the provincial level is geared towards creating more accountability, more opportunities, and more responsibilities for the manufacturers, the producers and the distributors to manage their waste as part of their whole business rather than looking at it as an externality.'

They hope to reduce the cost of waste collection by \$11 million annually (based on today's system) by 2031.