

Aurora demands consultation over community mailboxes

By Brock Weir

After Canada Post announced intentions to cease door-to-door mail delivery in most areas last year, the 4,000-or-so Aurora households still receiving the service took comfort in statements they would be consulted on future community mailbox locations.

Months on, however, many residents are still waiting for that comfort and now Aurora is trying to flex its muscle to make it happen.

Council approved a multi-pronged motion Monday, initially put forward by Councillor Tom Mrakas calling for the Mayor to formally request the Minister Responsible for Canada Post to cease the installation of community mailboxes immediately and to revise its five-point action plan, which includes the elimination of home mail delivery, and to engage in full and meaningful consultation with all stakeholders, including the Town and its residents.

Its intention is to get Canada Post to the table and consult with area residents on the placement of new community boxes in established neighbourhoods.

It also calls on Town Staff to develop a bylaw which could result in more stringent standards for Canada Post to adhere to and associated fees when it comes to applying for the installation of community mailboxes.

The motion garnered the support of several Aurora residents who spoke in favour of the motion at this week's Council meeting, citing not just a perceived lack of consultation on the part of the Crown Corporation, but also safety concerns, with some of the locations already earmarked by Canada Post.

"This is our town and we're not asking you to bend over backwards," said James Hoyes of what he would request of the postal service. "Come to the table and listen to us. Listen to the fact we haven't been consulted as residents and you, a Council, haven't had the opportunity to [offer] your input."

The motion also had the support of Hamilton Councillor Terry Whitehead, who took the lead on the issue in his city. Appearing as a delegate this week, he outlined Hamilton's response to the situation and their efforts to halt Canada Post's plans, the fate of which could be decided in court later this month.

Part of the intent of his motion was to "have Hamilton's back," said Councillor Tom Mrakas, as well as the backs of residents.

"The intent of this is not to prohibit the installation of the mailboxes," he said. "The bigger aspect of this whole thing is how to regulate where and how they are placed. When it comes down to it, we are the stewards of the right of way, we own the land, we maintain the property, we incur costs on the property, and we should have a say on what's installed and placed on these lands. That is what has been missing in this whole process."

"Canada Post is adamant that we have no say, they have the final say. To me, that is wrong. At the end of the day, the burden of maintaining the areas will fall to taxpayers and it is not fair. As elected officials we are here to protect our taxpayers and it is our job to come up with policies to protect them."

Who better to consult on the locations of these mailboxes, he concluded, than the people who live here and know the neighbourhoods best?

From the perspective of Councillor John Abel, although the wording of the motion needed to be reworked, he was "appalled" and how "heavy handed" the process was. Fees for Canada Post to place these boxes should be increased, he said. Councillor Wendy Gaertner added she supported a bylaw, and fees not only covering the cost incurred from going onto municipal rights of way, but also for maintaining them. One thing that was lacking in the motion, she added, were safety concerns surrounding some proposed locations.

‘I support the intent of the motion and that, to me, is to say to Canada Post the way they are conducting themselves is not respectful of residents and municipalities,’ said Councillor Michael Thompson, of the division between municipal, provincial and federal governments. ‘We help build our community, and they need to be collaborative with us rather than assume we’re the little kid in the family and ignore us. It falls upon municipalities themselves to take that stand. This is a little bit of a protest vote [to say] you need to hear us and it is not okay.’

Others around the table were less enthusiastic about the motion. Although Mayor Geoff Dawe agreed that the ‘behaviour’ shown to neighbourhoods was ‘arrogant and totally unfair,’ he had misgivings that the wording of the motion would actually achieve its stated objectives.

Councillor Jeff Thom, on the other hand, was somewhat supportive of the motion, underscoring his concerns about the impacts of community mailboxes in heritage districts, and offered an alternative perspective.

‘It is certainly a pressing issue [but] I am encouraged Canada Post is looking at ways they can modernize their delivery of mail,’ he said. ‘They are also a taxpayer [funded] body. We all pay Federal tax.’

For Councillor Paul Pirri, it was a matter of seeing how Hamilton fares before moving forward. At this point, he said, there was no reason to enact a bylaw as courts have yet to rule whether a similar bylaw passed by the City of Hamilton is actually allowed under federal, provincial and municipal jurisdictions.

‘If something comes back and it is beneficial towards Hamilton, I will be happy to look at it then,’ said Councillor Pirri. ‘It is an extra burden on our taxpayers and I don’t think it is right at this time. When you look at the situation, we are at the bottom of the totem pole. We exist at the pleasure of the Province. The Province exists at the pleasure of the Canadian Charter. There is no bottom-up decision-making. This is an illegal motion as it is trying to dictate what the Federal Government should be doing. It is something we have absolutely no jurisdiction over.’

‘Let Hamilton be the test subject. It is not something Aurora should be endeavouring on.’