

Aurora melts back to normal following pre-Christmas ice storm



By Brock Weir

Aurora had a bit of a relief on Saturday and Sunday as warmer weather conspired to undo some of the damage left from the previous weekend's ice storm.

Trees were felled and damage across Aurora mounted up on December 20 and 21 as freezing rain encrusted most of the town in thick ice.

By the following Sunday, over 3,000 Aurora households remained without power and the Town opened up the Aurora Seniors' Centre as a warming station to those without heat. Before the warming station was closed at noon on Tuesday, dozens of Aurorans used the opportunity to ride out the effects of the storm until power was restored.

"We had ample warning on the storm and it gives people time to prepare," said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe on how the Town got ready for the blast.

At this point, he said, there is not yet an estimate on the cost of the cleanup, but there are a "huge" amount of trees down.

"Driving around you can see there are all sorts of issues," he said. "Some streets are much worse than others. It seems to be a lot of the ash trees, which had probably been weakened by the emerald ash borer."

Power outages also affected traffic, knocking out the bulk of Aurora's traffic lights even in areas that had otherwise avoided an outage.

By Christmas Eve, PowerStream had restored much of the power to areas affected by outages, with Kennedy Street from Bathurst to Murray Drive, along with portions of Murray Drive and Old Bloomington Road from Yonge to Bayview being among the last to get up and running again.

Cleanups, however, continue.

"Town crews are currently working to clear debris from sidewalks to ensure the safety of residents," said Michael Kemp, Manager of Corporate Communications for the Town of Aurora in a statement last week. "In order to assist with these efforts, residents are asked not to place fallen debris onto the boulevard next to the curb. The Town of Aurora is considering options for collection of residential debris and will be communicating this to the public at a later date.

?Residents are also advised to stay off trails as the priority remains for clearing debris from sidewalks and boulevards. As always, please exercise caution when walking on sidewalks as crews continue their efforts to remove thick layers of ice.?

Throughout the ordeal residents banded together, sharing resources like firewood and, if they were in a pocket of electricity, welcomed people through their doors. One such person who received a helping hand was Tyler Barker, a resident who needs a large electric wheelchair to get around.

He found a particular lifeline in the Central York Fire Services (CYFS) after a technical glitch indicated his street was back up and running when they were actually in the dark.

With the battery draining on both his wheelchair and the lift to get him in and out, the CYFS sent over a generator to give them a boost. For Mr. Barker, however, the situation highlighted a gap.

?We were off for 48 hours,? he said. ?For somebody like myself, or someone who is on a ventilator, or elderly and didn't have a generator, there could be a better way. PowerStream guys were on the frontlines and gave up their Christmas holidays, but maybe next time there could be a different way of identifying people who are really in need like these people on ventilators, the elderly, or people with newborns.

?Maybe they can be identified through a registry, or the Town of Aurora could have a hotline.?

Region-wide, an estimated 70,800 customers were left without power after the ice storm. Pockets of outages remained in other areas of York Region at the start of the week.