

Aurora should have referendum on windrow clearing, says Councillor

By Brock Weir

Clearing windrows, the pesky ridge of snow and ice that accumulates at the end of your freshly shovelled driveway after a plow goes by, can be an aggravating business, but Aurorans should be asked if they want to pay the price for making them a thing of the past. This was the view Councillor Wendy Gaertner presented last week after Council accepted the recommendation of staff to put a potential windrow clearing program on ice.

As The Auroran reported earlier this month, Council was due to consider the implementation of a windrow clearing program. In compiling their report to local lawmakers, municipal staff recommended against the move, estimating a town-wide program impacting the 18,000 private driveways in Aurora could cost taxpayers an extra \$1.5 million, a cost that did not include the purchasing of new snow removal equipment to make it all possible.

Although Councillors argued this would break down to a tax impact of \$70 - \$80 per average household, most agreed that the program would prove to be not only too costly, but also impractical as windrow clearing programs in other municipalities can only clear windrows in a time window between 16 and 20 hours after a snowfall.

‘Maybe we just need to do a referendum on this for next year,’ said Councillor Gaertner. ‘I think the public needs to be educated as to why Council may, after so much time and research, not make the decision to help them with the windrows.’

Education and communications were the emerging themes when Council tackled the topic last week, with Councillor Michael Thompson stating that whether or not Aurora chose to proceed with a windrow program, managing the expectations of the public was essential.

‘Most of the conversation has been around the cost [and] while cost is certainly a factor, I think the expectations of the public is even more so,’ he said.

Looking at a report produced by the City of Vaughan, Councillor Thompson said it showed that the introduction of a windrow clearing program had created ‘a high level of service expectation’ that resulted in ‘a marked increase in the number of complaints received.’

Windrow-clearing blades attached to snow plows, the report went on to note, had been found to cause damage to residential frontages, including landscaping, culverts and driveways themselves, while also having a negative impact on waste pickup.

‘Absolutely the cost is a factor, and so too is the expectation,’ he continued. ‘Part of it is driven by the fact that in some of these communities that do it, it is a 16 hour window and that drives a lot of the complaint process. I am glad that the recommendation is not to proceed, but I certainly think that while some of the conversations [have been] around the cost? it should also be about the service levels.’

Councillor Gaertner agreed that the program has its challenges, and if Council decided not to proceed, communications had to make it very clear as to why it wasn't going forward.

‘It's really not that much money on the tax bill,’ she said.

She had some pause, however, when Al Downey, Director of Operations, was asked whether the 18,000 driveway figure outlined in the report included driveways shared by residents in condominiums and apartments. Those residences were not included, he said, but the taxpayers living in those kinds of units, would be paying the same tax increase for windrow clearing even if they weren't able to enjoy the service.

‘It would be very difficult to separate residences from condo owners from the residential tax,’ agreed CAO Doug Nadorozny. ‘We would have to create an area-specific charge. It would pretty much be impossible to separate that charge for just people that have the regular private residence from condo owners.’

Councillor Sandra Humfries, on the other hand, said she hoped the issue wasn't dead and could be revisited by Council for implementation in a future year ‘even as a pilot project’ when budget talks resume in February.

‘It looks a little cost prohibitive, [but] in the large picture, the \$1.5 million across residents may not be so much,’ she said. ‘But, I think we should learn from other municipalities. I know the City of Toronto used to do it years ago. I would love to have perhaps a trial pilot that we can talk about?during the budget discussion.’