

Bylaw would have negative impact on homeowners, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

A proposed new bylaw calling on residents to put more work into Town-owned boulevards outside their homes was nipped in the bud last week after concerns it could negatively impact seniors and other homeowners.

Had the bylaw gone ahead, it would change Aurora's Clean Yards policy to require private property owners to maintain and care for boulevards adjacent to their own property and penalties for non-compliance.

According to a report before Council by Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, the Town already has policies related to keeping yards safe and waste-free, but the new policy would take things a step further.

Occasionally property owners allow their properties to fall into non-compliance, including the boulevards abutting their property or the property owner will maintain their own property and not the boulevards, she noted.

An amendment to the Clean Yards bylaw would give the Town the authority to issue notices and further contract the work to be done at the private property owner's expense.

She acknowledged, however, that the proposal would provide some challenges to property owners, including to owners of townhouses who might not keep a lawnmower or when their own properties are separated from the boulevards by fences.

It was these, and other challenges, that caused Councillors not to act on it last week.

This seems to have a significantly negative impact on seniors, said Councillor Michael Thompson. Often they are already paying someone to cut their grass and do some maintenance and now we're sort of asking them to do even more and take care of municipal lands. This might impact them financially.

He also said he was unclear whether this policy was the result of any public consultation. Ms. Van Leeuwen said, however, that there was no public consultation leading up to this but there would be a communications strategy going forward.

We'd do a soft launch with the bylaw and implement a warning system where there are contraveners of the bylaw, she said.

The Councillor nevertheless maintained that this was going zero to 60 in one step and the education campaign, if anything did come from this, would need to come first.

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, taxpayers should be kept in mind in that their tax dollars are already going towards the maintenance of public land.

The boulevards belong to the Town, she said. What right do we have to put citizens under a bylaw that they have to maintain property? There are already paying in their taxes for these services. You have some people who take great pride in maintaining the boulevard in front of their property and you can always tell because there is never a weed in site and it is immaculate. There are other properties that are not.

Some are long past an age where they can haul a lawnmower out to the boulevard. Henderson Drive has boulevards behind their properties. Are those homeowners supposed to come out and maintain those boulevards? I don't think so unless you want a revolution on your hands, this might be a good way to go about it.

Other Councillors, however, were more sympathetic towards the proposal. Councillor Chris Ballard, for instance, said similar policies are understood in Aurora when it comes to clearing snow off sidewalks in front of homes and this policy would not be exceedingly different.

?Having said that, I believe at the end of the day people who don't maintain the boulevards are obviously not that concerned about the curb appeal of their house,? he said. ?Anyone who wants to maintain the value of their house makes sure the boulevards are cut and generally don't have too many weeds there. What's next? Are we going to be asking people to trim the trees that the Town owns? This is a proposed bylaw in search of a problem.?

A further argument in favour of the bylaw change, according to Ms. Van Leeuwen's report, was Aurora's current service levels do not provide for this kind of boulevard maintenance. As Aurora is set to review the findings of the service level review to determine how much bang Aurorans want and expect from their tax buck when it comes to municipal services, Councillor Wendy Gaertner suggested this bylaw was premature.

?We're having a service level review very shortly,? she said. ?It is problematic and it would be interesting to know how much you believe [boulevard maintenance] is costing us. Maybe that should be part of the service level review.?

According to Parks Manager Jim Tree the suggestion stems from ?the odd non-compliant property.?. The Town receives, on average, six to eight complaints, over boulevard maintenance during the summer months, often over weeds.