

Clear bag program kicked to the curb

By Brock Weir

Aurora's proposed clear bag program was nixed at Council Tuesday night.

Councillors rejected a plan which would have seen a "soft launch" of an initiative compelling residents to ditch their traditional black garbage bags in favour of clear alternatives, before becoming mandatory in October.

Going into Tuesday night's Council meeting, the program hung in the balance after failing on a tie vote at the Committee level the previous week.

Those supporting moving forward with the initiative at the time, including Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor John Abel said the program, which seeks to increase diversion from the waste stream, would be a positive move for the environment. For others, however, there was insufficient community buy-in to sway them in casting their vote in favour of the initiative.

"I know there is a resistance by many residents that they do not want to change the bags and they are not in favour of a clear bag for many reasons," said Councillor John Abel, noting he believed clear bags would result in a cost savings if more material is taken out of the garbage stream, resulting in a healthier environment. "One [reason] I hear often is it is going to cost more. I think the report bears out it is not going to cost more.

"The fact remains the diversion rate does go up and you're dealing with less dangerous materials in incineration and getting rid of waste. It is a matter of educating and making people do whatever is good for the community. I think we should be able to put it on a trial basis instead of nixing it at this stage right now."

Added Mayor Dawe: "I appreciate some people are not happy about the process. I understand it. I get it. I happen to think environmentally it is the right thing for us to be doing. That is why I brought it forward in the first place and that is why I am supporting it."

The recommendation up for consideration at Council this week calls for, in addition to the actual rollout of the program, two further public information sessions, as well as online surveys, to increase education and awareness amongst residents at large.

It was this educational component, as well as for supporting the environment, that won more muted enthusiasm from Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Misconceptions are out there in the community that need to be addressed through these sessions, along with concerns from residents that if they have a dispute over bags that have been rejected by the waste collectors, they can take it up with the Town rather than representatives from Green For Life, the waste collectors contracted by the Town of Aurora.

Added Councillor Jeff Thom: "This is a move in the right direction. You have to recognize there are concerns and I think education on this is key. We have heard the evidence, this is something that has worked in other communities, and it is probably the way in which most communities are going to be moving in the future. I think we should get on board as early as possible."

Not so fast, said the other four members of Council, who remained unconvinced on both the merits and the practicality of what was before them. First to speak out was Councillor Paul Pirri, who said he was unconvinced about the numbers in the report, citing the amount of waste collected, and whether they were Aurora-centric numbers. The ability to put an unlimited amount of opaque bags within a larger clear bag was also a reason for pause.

"I am not personally confident in moving forward with that process until [we know] what we have in place will make an overall impact," he said. "If we have the ability to put out black garbage bags in the future and we're putting it in the clear bags, I am not

sure what that's doing. On the whole, I applaud the direction we're going in, but I don't think there are the necessary numbers to back it up for Aurora.?

A similar view was offered by Councillor Harold Kim who said he 'applauded' environmental initiatives, but was concerned about 'harmonization' in waste collection across York Region as well as a lack of numbers.

Also stepping back from jumping on the bandwagon was Councillor Michael Thompson. Waste management, he said, was one of the core services offered by the Town of Aurora and it is Council's responsibility to be environmentally conscious and reduce waste wherever possible. While he said he supports programs like backyard composting, he said the clear bag program targets the wrong people.

'If someone is doing their recycling and making every effort in their home, the clear bag program is not going to add to the diversion rate or help that home itself,' he said. 'The clear bag is only going to address issues for people who either don't know how to recycle or choose not to recycle. For those who don't know how, I think the alternative is an education program.'

'One of the key lines to me is that enforcement is required as a last resort to encourage change behaviours. In my opinion, I see the clear bag program as a bit of an enforcement program [targeting] those who don't know how or choose not to recycle.'

Councillor Tom Mrakas was also succinct in his opposition.

'I have yet to find one resident who has spoken to me in favour of this program,' he said. 'I share those same concerns as many of the residents I've dealt with personally. I don't see the merit in this program. I don't see the need for this program and therefore I won't be supporting this motion tonight.'