

Clear Bag program will come under closer look this week

By Brock Weir

Aurora's Clear Bag waste program, which would make dark green and black household garbage bags a thing of the past across Town, will come under closer scrutiny this week after clearing its first hurdle at the committee level.

Councillors approved a motion at last week's General Committee which would bring forward a "soft launch" of the Clear Bag initiative this July to educate residents about the new way to dispose of their trash, ahead of the full-out launch on January 1, 2015.

"It is the beginning of the next big thing," Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, told Councillors last week. "There is a lot of activity in the east coast with this program, and there are a number of municipalities in Ontario picking up the pieces. Just in the last six months we've had it locally in York Region [in Markham] and with Markham's success we brought this report forward."

Clear garbage bags will provide waste collectors insight into just what exactly they are picking up and ensuring it goes into the proper channel. It results in "cleaner waste" he noted before it goes onto the next step of the disposal process, increases diversion rates of items out of the garbage system into recycling and composting streams, or out of the system all together such as batteries and paint cans, and saves money by minimising sorting that needs to be done.

"It is one of those programs that as people start recognizing the value of it and the fear of change is not as risky, there is an uptake as more municipalities catch on," said Mr. Simanovskis. "From my perspective, best benefit to us would be very little change in behaviour. In Markham's case, a 10 per cent increase in the diversion of recyclable materials [is] to me a very effective and very inexpensive win."

While Councillors were largely in support of going forward with the program, Councillor Michael Thompson was one of the few voices of hesitation. For him, not all the cards were on the table for Council's consideration, particularly the "challenges" of other municipalities that have put this program in place not only in getting residents on board, but also from an efficiency standpoint.

"It is taking longer for [collectors] to do the routes because they are spending time checking the clear bags and stuff," said Councillor Thompson. "The report is very rosy but I am not seeing some of the issues and challenges, or a little bit explaining some of the possible implications that we're fully aware of what this switch means. There are some bumps in the road."

"I've read about other municipalities having significant push back on clear bags and some of the steps they have taken along with them."

After asking for a further presentation being made by Council by Vision Quest, which worked with the City of Markham to get this program in place, to address these concerns, they are expected to appear before Council this week.

"I am a little hesitant to rubber stamp this tonight without really understanding some of the challenges and bumps in the road," Councillor Thompson concluded.

Other issues around the table included a concern from Councillor Sandra Humfries in ensuring local retailers were on board with keeping clear garbage bags in ready supply, as well as from Councillor Wendy Gaertner on the provision in the proposal where one can still put their garbage in opaque grocery bags before popping them into a clear garbage bag before they hit the curb.

The answer was "yes" for both questions. Speaking to the latter, Mr. Simanovskis said they are not trying to "change the behaviours" of people using grocery bags or white bags like Kitchen Catchers, but the intent is to weed out some of the "more obvious contaminants" like computer elements, electronics, and construction activities.

?It is to allow for typical household activities to proceed and it gives us an opportunity to catch materials which shouldn't be in the waste stream.?

Speaking in favour of the plan, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe said he appreciated the concerns but noted it is another step forward in the Region's SM4RT Living Waste Reduction Campaign.

?[In] other municipalities it has improved their diversion rate and certainly some of the issues we have to deal with is landfill and where the waste goes,? he said.

Added Councillor Evelyn Buck, relating the program to upcoming waste partnerships between York and Durham Regions, ?I think it is an excellent step in progress. It is absolutely critical we get that stuff out of the garbage before it gets anywhere close to the incinerator.?