

Clear Bag proposal kicked to curb by Council



Resident Nancee Webb showed just what she could hide in a clear bag in a presentation to Council last week.

By Brock Weir

Residents opposing the launch of Aurora's proposed clear bag program this spring breathed a sigh of relief last week as the plan fizzled at the Council table.

Council voted 6 ? 3 to ditch the plan, which would have been launched in June before the switch from traditional black bags became mandatory in October, following significant public opposition and disagreements around the Council table.

Going into last week's Council meeting, the program hung in the balance after failing on a tie vote at the Committee level, with the program's fate resting in the hands of Councillor Sandra Humfries. Ultimately, Councillor Humfries voted against the program.

On hand last Tuesday trying to persuade Council to ditch the plan was resident Nancee Webb, who came to the podium bearing a small kitchen catcher. Opening up the bag, she pulled out cardboard, a plastic water bottle, a tin can, and, to mock gasps and hisses from members of the public in the audience, batteries and a not-yet-empty can of paint.

All these items, she said, were intended to be diverted from the waste stream through the clear bag program, but these opaque bags could still be used within a larger clear one.

?I don't see how using clear garbage bags will ensure these items are disposed of in the proper fashion,? said Ms. Webb. ?Are we achieving anything with this clear bag initiative??

This was the general consensus of Council. As deliberations began, however, Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor John Abel, two of the more vocal proponents of the plan, suggested scrapping the program as it was presented and moving forward with a fully voluntary clear bag program which would allow Aurorans to use clear bags if they saw fit while maintaining the status quo for others.

Bolstering this idea, Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, suggested proceeding with public workshops to continue education on such a voluntary program, but both components were ultimately binned as well.

?I don't at all see the point in a Council-supported volunteer project and hosting open houses,? said Councillor Paul Pirri. ?It seems a bit like a make-work project to me. If people would like to use clear bags, by all means they should. Council doesn't need to sanction a voluntary buy-in. Through this motion you're telling people it's okay to do what you would like to do in terms of the way you

recycle and remove your garbage. We don't have the implementation of a voluntary blue shirt program where you're allowed to wear blue shirts and we ask staff to report back on whether or not people like to wear blue shirts.?

While the tides ultimately turned on the Clear Bag program, there were still some supporters at the table. Among them was Councillor Jeff Thom, who reiterated his support for the initiative but voted against proceeding with the program on a strictly volunteer basis.

?I think if we're going to go forward with clear bags, we go forward with clear bags,? he said. ?If we aren't going to go forward with it, we don't. If people are putting out clear bags voluntarily and their bags get tagged, how do they sort that out? I would rather the whole town jump in all together.?

Although Councillor John Abel, another vocal proponent of the clear bag program, put forward Mayor Dawe's suggestion of going the volunteer route, he ultimately asked to withdraw the motion after the lengthy debate. Councillor Wendy Gaertner, on the other hand, said she was still in favour of proceeding with a component of the program but further public education was key.

?We have a lot more work to do as a Council and staff to educate the public,? she said. ?I really didn't want to see this just disappear because I think it is the way of the future [and] it is important for the environment. To me, the most important part is the education [in] the program. I really appreciate Councillor Abel wanting to do something and just not letting it slip out of people's minds. Having some clear bags may be an interesting idea.?

Seeing both sides of the argument was Councillor Harold Kim. Although he said he supported the Clear Bag program in principle, now was not the time to put it in motion.

?Frankly, this volunteer suggestion seems like a consolation prize,? he said, suggesting the pro side ?lost? the previous week. ?Maybe in another year or two, people might be more receptive. I would all be for being a cheerleader for this program if there [was more support]. I don't want to be dragging residents who are kicking and screaming about this program.?

Mayor Dawe replied that he took exception to the comment that the pro side ?lost?, adding he believed environmentally it was still the right thing to do.

?The idea is to encourage those who don't want to change their habits, and that is what they found in Markham,? said Mayor Dawe on following the implementation of a similar program in Markham. ?Seatbelts came in after a voluntary period. People were actively encouraged to wear seatbelts before it was mandated. People were encouraged to recycle before it was mandated. It is time we do it.?