

Clear Bag waste program binned until 2015

By Brock Weir

Aurora's controversial 'clear bag' program could be tossed into the bin this week, at least until next year.

Councillors considered a recommendation from municipal staff last week to bring the 'clear bag' program back for consideration by the next Council in January for a proposed launch that April.

This recommendation, however, reached an impasse at last week's General Committee meeting, ultimately failing on a tie vote. This inaction is expected to be ratified by Council this week.

Speaking against the motion, Councillor Michael Thompson questioned the 'scaled-back' nature of the program.

When the clear bag initiative was first floated last year, it proposed a six-month 'soft launch' of a program to have all Aurora residents switch over to clear garbage bags rather than the traditional black and green sacks. This would, they argued, allow not only residents to get used to the program, but also afford retailers a chance to get up to speed and be fully stocked with the new required bags.

Delays at the Council table, however, made these previously floated timelines unworkable.

'In both proposals we were anticipating having retailers who stocked up before the launch of either program and that would be in the two or three months prior to the actual soft launch,' said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, last week. 'The shorter duration for the soft launch and the hard launch for the new program is to allow us to bring it in to work around the summer schedule.'

Councillor Thompson, however, said he did not think getting retailers ready for this by September, well before the actual launch, would be a realistic goal and questioned what the ultimate cost such a program would be for residents.

The intent of the clear bag program is to ensure household waste ends up in the proper channels. Paint cans and batteries have often been cited as some of the main culprits that need to be deflected out of the main channels, and clear bags would provide a collectors a window into ensuring things end up where they are supposed to go.

'You say there are no direct costs related to the approval of the program and yet in our discussions you indicated that while this will reduce our [waste] tonnage, it may increase our recycling costs' and we would see a rise in our recycling costs because of it,' said Councillor Thompson.

According to Mr. Simanovskis, the entire program is dedicated to increasing Aurora's Diversion rates. Current contracts with Green For Life peg the costs of handling recyclables as higher than garbage. At this point, the actual cost of switching over remains hypothetical.

'What we would do is monitor the results of any change in our program to see what those costs would be,' said Mr. Simanovskis. 'Our costs are actually trending lower than budget based on the removal of glass, some of the heavier materials, less paper and plastics. Another unknown in this program is the hidden waste of their materials, such as yard waste, that can't be collected in the leaf bag program, but that is often hidden in the black bags. That material was found [in Markham] to reduce their overall tonnage. We potentially have a cost-savings on the waste side if those tonnage reductions are significant. I think the focus on the whole program is to increase or encourage an increase in recycling and that is the primary objective of that.'

Nevertheless, the majority of Council would not get on board with the clear bag program. Continuing his opposition, Councillor Thompson recalled a recent trip to Markham with Councillor John Abel to get some firsthand knowledge on how the city successfully implemented the clear bag initiative.

A key component of their plan, he said, was clearly outlining the 'rationale and ideology', as well as the benefits, of going clear to their respective residents, but Aurora is not yet at that point.

'I don't feel there is a compelling argument to bring this forward and impose it upon all the residents,' concluded Councillor Thompson. 'I have heard nothing but concern and objection to it. I think if we are going to bring the program forward, or even allude to bringing a program forward, those compelling arguments need to come out with a rationale behind it.'

Councillor Abel added they were told during their trip Markham residents originally displayed 'strong resistance' to going clear, but an education campaign turned them around.

In response, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe proposed moving forward with a marketing plan for clear bags outlining how to move forward with an eye on a launch in six months, but although seconded, it did not get far off the table.

Others objected to making a decision on clear bags this late in the game with the 2014 Municipal Election looming and a new Council set to take office by December.

'I wholeheartedly agree with [the clear bag] concept, but my only hiccup is a potentially new Council,' said Councillor John Gallo. 'My preference is always to allow new Councils to find their way and not necessarily impose these types of things. I prefer it on a pending list and once they are there, figure out what they want to do with it.'