

Clear Bag waste program put on back burner after calls for public outreach

By Brock Weir

Aurora residents have spoken for and against a new program that would require the use of clear garbage bags over the use of the traditional black and green bags.

If you're sitting on the fence on the issue, however, a public education campaign will be coming your way to outline the pros and cons of clear bags and answer questions you might have.

That was the decision which came out of Council last week after the clear bag program appeared to be in peril. A motion brought forward by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe proposed bringing the clear bag program back for discussion and approval by the next Council in January 2015, but using the intervening months as an 'engagement' period on Aurora's and York Region's overall waste diversion strategy.

'I believe this is the route we have to go because I believe we continually need to look for ways to enhance how we do our recycling,' said Mayor Dawe, pointing out his support for the Clear Bag program overall. 'It is the proper thing to do, in my opinion. It has been said by many people that you don't inherit the earth from your parents, you borrow it from your children and grandchildren. I think we need to be looking at ways to reduce waste and be more environmentally friendly.'

This is not the only answer, but I think it is part of the overall strategy.'

The Mayor's motion was largely supported by Council, with Councillors Evelyn Buck and Paul Pirri voting against it, particularly for the education and outreach component to tell residents what they might be getting. But, for others, it was also a matter of creating and promoting an overall vision for waste in Aurora.

'We seem to be moving forward with this, but what is the overarching strategy?' asked Councillor Michael Thompson. 'It is not being communicated to the public the benefits and giving them the understanding of why we want to initiate this. It is only when we were coming out of the discussion [we heard] we were struggling with diversion rates.'

'If we expect the residents to adopt a program, they need to clearly understand the benefits. There needs to be a buy-in and there needs to be support.'

According to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, his counterparts from across York Region met earlier in May to discuss an integrated solid waste plan that would connect Regional municipalities. It is a four year plan, he said, that would be coming forward later this year as part of the 2015 budget process.

A contract renewal process is also underway with the Region's Northern Six (N6) municipalities on their collective buy-in with Green For Life, the waste collection company, which came under fire earlier this year following the pre-Christmas ice storm. This process will examine service levels and other options that might be available to the N6, and these options will be coming forward to Council this winter.

From Mr. Simanovskis' perspective, moving towards a Clear Bag program is essential to ensure household waste is funnelled into the proper channels in the years ahead, particularly in advance of the garbage incineration plant built jointly between York and Durham regions coming online. Clear Bag programs in other municipalities such as Markham, he noted, have shown a significant improvement in waste diversion.

Some Councillors, however, were not heartened by the success the program has found in other municipalities.

'It seems to me there is a missing link in the discussion where we made a big leap forward when we introduced the green bin

program," said Councillor Buck, referring to the collection of organic kitchen waste. "After a number of months it was declared an amazing success, the participation went far beyond what anyone expected and residents were hugely impressed.

"I am mystified why we suddenly have a crisis and have to start educating people about the virtues of separating garbage. What happened to the way we have been doing it and why do we have to do it all over again? [Durham has advised] the Clear Bag program is by no means the answer and education is the answer. We have gotten off track somewhere [and into] a discussion that wasn't really relevant."

In Councillor Thompson's view, however, the education component should not simply be about the colour or lack thereof of curbside bags.

"Let's also stay focused on what is the overall strategy," he said. "It shouldn't be limited to the Clear Bag initiative. I think it should also be looking to the greater strategy around waste diversion and what we are trying to achieve. So much is out there with regards to what other municipalities are doing, initiatives, trying to be innovative, diversion rates, there is a continuous improvement plan where communities can get grants and funds to help lead these education programs."