

Clear garbage bag program delayed, 2015 now target launch date

By Brock Weir

Clear garbage bags cleared another Council hurdle last week in coming to a curbside near you ? but ?when?? now remains the big question.

Last week, Councillors approved a recommendation from Aurora's Environmental Advisory Committee on consent calling on Council to endorse the clear bag program.

Further consideration will be given to the program this month.

The clear bag program would be a two-step process that would eventually get all Aurora residents to abandon the traditional black or green garbage bags in favour of clear plastic sacks. The objective of the program is to help waste collectors ensure that garbage, recyclables and compostables get into the right channels.

Now, with Council approving the plan in principle following the Committee's recommendation, it is time for municipal staff to get down to business and develop an implementation strategy. That strategy is expected to come before Council for consideration later this month.

When the clear bag program was first floated at the Council table, staff originally envisioned a soft launch of the program beginning July 1 allowing Aurora residents, and indeed retailers, to familiarize themselves with the initiative. After this soft launch phase, it was proposed to be fully implemented by January 1, 2015, requiring all homeowners to use the new clear bags.

Delays at the Council table and further talks at the advisory committee level, however, now make those deadlines unlikely, according to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services.

?My proposal right now is looking at a January soft launch and bringing a report back later on,? says Mr. Simanovskis. ?I needed approval back in February to get the vendors on board with the inventory and there needs to be three months to do the change out. Because of the timing, my recommendation would be to defer implementing the program until 2015. We have just lost too much time to make it work this year.?

Although letters to the editor and polls have indicated a negative response to implementing the clear bag program, Mr. Simanovskis says questionnaires available at the Aurora Home Show last month to gauge response and interest in the program had minimal response. He also says they expect little push back from retailers in getting them on board with carrying an adequate supply of the bags.

?From our consultant that has done this in other municipalities, it doesn't seem to matter [to retailers] one way or another,? says Mr. Simanovskis. ?All they need is enough lead time to change out the inventory. What [the consultant] will actually do is once we have the green light, they will do a promotion to encourage people to not buy black bags. That is the lead time we are missing right now.

?With that lead time, we can get more engagement with the community.?

In the months since the project was first floated to Council, a number of questions had been raised around the table. The first, and foremost, was the privacy issue which would essentially give waste collectors a window into what you were throwing out.

This question was addressed by allowing opaque bags like white ?kitchen catchers? and grocery bags to be allowed for pickup if they were contained within the clear bag. Questions were also raised on just who would do the ?policing? on the streets once the clear bag program becomes mandatory.

According to Mr. Simanovskis, when these questions were raised during the winter, policing would be done on an "as identified" basis by current collectors and not involve the bylaw department. Even then, that would only come into play when "non-compliant" materials, such as paint cans, were found.

Some Councillors remained unconvinced about the program's practicality and benefit to the environment, and wanted more information on how communities like Markham, which implemented the program successfully, addressed all these concerns.

"If we're going to implement a project like this, we have to understand the rationale behind it and what the true benefit to the community is," said Councillor Michael Thompson at the time.