

?Compromise? on golf course tree removal up for approval this week

By Brock Weir

Aurora golf courses could see tighter restrictions on the number of trees they can cut down on their properties.

Councillors are expected to ratify recommendations coming forward from last week's General Committee meeting, placing slightly tighter restrictions on area golf course owners. The recommendations are part of a wholesale review of the Town's tree protection bylaw which governs the number of trees that can be removed on individual properties over the course of the year.

If approved by Council, they will take effect on May 1.

A review of the tree protection bylaw has been in the works since 2012 when residents in the south end of Aurora brought forward their concerns about large-scale tree removals then underway on their neighbouring Beacon Hall Golf Course. As the bylaw currently stands, golf courses are exempt from Aurora's tree permit process and can remove as many trees as they would like in areas defined as woodlots. They are, however, subject to Regional bylaws. Municipal staff proposed changing the status-quo requiring golf course owners to apply for a permit if planning to remove more than 10 trees in 12 months. Councillors, however, voted this down last week, in favour of a second option.

This would put golf courses under the umbrella of the tree bylaw and limit them to one tree per four hectares per year, which could equate to 10 trees over the course of the year for an average-sized course.

Although golf courses have expressed opposition to the restrictions, this was seen as a compromise at Town Hall ? particularly from Mayor Geoffrey Dawe who said in further discussions, he has reconsidered his previous stance supporting the golf course exemption.

?If we are regulating everywhere else, I don't have an issue regulating golf courses, but I don't think I would regulate them at the level that is recommended here,? said Mayor Dawe ahead of the amendment.

For Councillor Sandra Humfryes, the second option was a compromise. It wasn't a matter of saying outright golf courses wouldn't be able to remove more than 10 trees, but it would provide a safeguard requiring further approval if they wanted to apply for more. ?It is regulating and having those discussions,? she said.

Councillor Michael Thompson said he agreed, noting the second option was a way to bring golf courses to the table for further conversations and ?collaboration? on what is a ?reasonable limit that allows them to operate their businesses without too much restriction.?

?It is the start of a conversation,? he said. ?It is ironic that we just said for large properties it is two trees per .2 hectares. On a residential property we will allow you to remove more trees than on a golf course. Let's have that conversation, find that right number that is respectful of our need to protect the landscape but at the same time allows them to operate. I hope the golf community comes out during the process and works with us to collaborate to find a reasonable solution.?

For Councillor John Abel, who has worked in golf course landscaping, however, the bylaw shouldn't interfere with how businesses such as these operate.

Likening it to Aurora interfering with tree removal on the Oak Ridges moraine around train tracks by CN Rail who removed trees and branches for safety reasons, golf courses should be given further consideration in how they maintain their business.

?When a tree matures and it crowds and disease sets in on the greens, that is the nature of their business,? said Councillor Abel. ?They do so with the utmost respect for trees because a treed golf course is a mature course and it is better for their business. I only see this as an arbitrary, restrictive number. It pays no mind to the density of the trees.

?This is a very unfair reaction to apply this heavy-handed restriction across golf courses and I don't think that is the nature of the Council decision. I am all for canopy and wildlife, but look at the devastation that took place in our town, in our region with the ice storm. We shouldn't be telling golf courses how many trees they should be cutting down and I think we should just let them continue on running their business. This looks to me like it is in response to a score to settle about people who brought it forward.?