

Cost of continued windrow pilot program could be \$100 per household this winter

Households looking to take part in the second year of Aurora's windrow removal pilot program could see a charge of \$100 for the season.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week at their first meeting back from the summer recess, began the process of hammering out a user fee system for the pilot program's second season, which was offered at no-cost last year to seniors in need and individuals living with disabilities.

The program saw workers deployed after snow events to remove the bank of snow at the ends of eligible driveways left after a snow plow passes.

After the first year of the initiative, Council decided to move forward on a partial cost-recovery basis. Now it's time to figure out just what that fee structure will look like.

According to a report before Council last week from Luigi Colangelo, the Town's Manager of Public Works, the delivery of the program last year cost Aurora approximately \$250,000 based on 1,100 participating households, or \$230 per household.

Colangelo's report initially recommended a fee of \$200 per household for the season ahead, a figure which was greeted with mixed reviews from local lawmakers.

Based upon a \$200 per applicant user fee, the Town would generate up to a maximum of \$220,000 in cost recoveries based upon 1,000 participants, he said. Using an estimated per household cost of \$230 and accounting for approximately 1,500 participating households, the 2024/2025 total program cost is estimated to be \$345,000. If up to 75 per cent of the assumed 1,500 participating households pay \$200, the Town would recover approximately \$225,000 resulting in a total program estimated net delivery cost of \$120,000.

A cap on participating households should be set at 1,500 households, he noted.

The basic thing is I think this is fair, and I know that residents won't like it, but this program costs a lot of money to the taxpayer. I think \$200 for the season is fair and if anybody does have a problem being able to pay this money there is a process to follow for relief from paying this, said Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner at last week's Committee meeting. I would like it to be zero, but I think it is financially prudent to charge something for cost recovery. At the moment, before I hear what Council says, I think \$200 is fair.

This was not a view shared by Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said \$200 was really high.

Councillor Gilliland questioned staff on the metrics they were using to determine costs of the program versus affordability for eligible seniors with fixed incomes.

Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Director of Operations, said the \$200 figure was arrived at based on a cross-section of what other municipalities were charging. She added her department used the Government of Canada's interpretation of what is classified as low income to make this decision, and she also agreed with Councillor Gilliland's suggestion of starting with a lower cost and raising it as needed in future years.

But, said Tienkamp, the final figure to be charged would be in the hands of Council.

As such, Councillor Gilliland put forward a successful motion to start the second year of the pilot at \$100 rather than \$200, a decision that will be up for ratification at the September 24 Council meeting.

?I personally would not like to see this over \$100,? said Councillor Gilliland. ?I think \$200 is way too much at the starting point when we're just worried about covering some costs because we know it's an expensive service. This is where I would start and, if we needed to increase that to offset costs, I think it's a little easier to make a subtle increase just over time, just as we do with any user fees.?

But Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson questioned whether implementing fees like these would have an impact as survey results of users presented to Council following the end of the snowy season revealed only 65 per cent of participants said they were willing to pay a price between \$75 and \$100 for the service.

?I get it from a cost recovery perspective and I think that is part of the decision that Council has to make in terms of what the right amount is, but I am wondering if we're reaching too far and we're going to see a significant drop off which [will lead us] to a significant shortfall in the cost-recovery perspective,? said Councillor Thompson.

Another change that could be coming pending Council's approval this month is eligibility criteria.

At the end of the pilot's first year, Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said he heard concerns from some residents that participating households had at least one able-bodied person at home that could aid in the windrow removal.

If Council formalizes the decision made at Committee, the Town will require disclosure of everyone who is able-bodied and over the age of 16 within an applicant household.

?They have to provide proof of occupancy within their residence and when they apply, they need to provide us with some sort of identification with their age and sign the disclosure whether they are able-bodied or not,? said Tienkamp.

By Brock Weir