

Council not willing to give up on windrow removal program ? just yet

Aurora's windrow removal program could see a reprieve for the 2025-2026 winter season, following a Council decision last week to delay a final decision on its future pending new funding models.

Last week, at the Committee level, Council considered a recommendation from staff to nix the program ahead of the upcoming winter season citing a number of financial and operational concerns, as well as complaints from residents on how effective the program was.

In order to deliver the program effectively, staff said the Town would need to invest in new equipment and new vehicles to make the program all it could be, but such vehicles could cost upwards of \$200,000 each.

While Council members were concerned over the price of the program ? it cost \$91,000 to deliver the program last year, despite an increase in user fees ? they said they saw the value of keeping it in place for seniors and disabled residents.

?I don't want a big capital investment and expensive equipment to do something for a small number of people, but I am just wondering? if there's any other options that staff have thought about that would provide the services we need for the most vulnerable at a cost that makes sense,? said Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese.

Staff said they have done ?a fair bit of research? on the matter and Operations Director Sara Tienkamp said they've ?presented everything that we have seen that's viable.?

?These are options that other municipalities have endeavoured to provide, either through a contracted service, this increased level of equipment that provides a better snow clearing result, and some of them are even providing stipends to residents to secure their own contractor, and then they manage and control when it is completed,? she said. ?Those are all three options that we have looked at, but we could certainly look at something else if that's Council's will.?

That was, indeed, the will of Council.

?The reality is you're always going to have people who complain and they're going to have high expectations, and that's the way I look at it ? I certainly don't want to squash a program for a few bad apples; it's going to ruin it for people who actually really do need this service, for people who actually appreciate the guidelines, follow the rules, have given accolades,? said Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

?Let's face it, we had a winter that was like none other in the last 30 or 40 years. Even the City of Toronto would say that they had their own Council meetings all about snow clearing and the services and so forth. This was the year where many municipalities were starting to review all their gaps and what they saw, so I wasn't really happy that in the report it said 'typical' (winter), because I don't think that was typical. Some winters you're lucky you have a plow come by three times a year, sometimes it's a lot, and I feel like we went through two major extremes with these pilots last year and then this year. I don't know if there's enough data to really support moving forward what that looks like.?

The cost of equipment, she added, has been an issue since Council first considered a windrow removal pilot and she said she ?feels like we've been walking around in circles? about doing it in-house, contracting out, ?and as we keep talking about it, the price of this keeps getting higher and higher.?

?I would be supportive of continuing this on at the very least in a pilot to collect some data in the next few years to see, because I feel like we've had some two major swings in weather, and I just really don't think it's fair to ruin it for the vast majority of people who actually follow the rules,? she said.

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson agreed that the last two winters showed "a bit of an extreme" and it is hard to determine just how effective the program has actually been.

"[Staff] talk about the total snow accumulation for this last winter was in line with past winters and perhaps we can get some of that information of previous accumulations over the years, because you do identify an issue when it comes to the equipment and the ability to move the snow and shovel it up over a certain height," he said. "Perhaps having some of those other pieces of information can help us determine whether or not the equipment really is a barrier for us to be successful in this endeavor and whether or not that needs to be addressed, or, at least give us a bigger picture around the potential for success going forward if we choose to repeat it again this year."

Complaints about the program were unsurprising, added Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, but he also said he didn't think other windrow cleaning teams could have done much better in the circumstances.

"We can't control the weather. There's going to be some winters you're going to have six, seven, eight feet of snow piled up, and you're going to need the equipment. There's going to be some winters, like a couple of years ago, where you might only have a few inches to a couple of feet where the existing equipment might be satisfactory. I don't see going forward with this program as is without new equipment, but that is cost prohibitive," he said.

"As I said a couple of years ago, a subsidy or a bursary system makes more sense. They can choose their own contractor. If they have any complaints, it can be addressed more quickly by people who are professionals in this area, and it eliminates the Town from having to have a 24-hour standard or equipment capacity. [It] certainly avoids capital investment liability and certainly we don't have to administer this program. I don't want to eliminate this pilot. Maybe we can do another, continue the pilot for another year with a subsidy, but they hire their own contractor."

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo voiced their support of continuing the program for at least another year to have a better picture of the path forward.

"It's an impossible situation," said Councillor Gaertner, noting that she wanted to increase the cost of residents opting in last year to offset costs.

Added Councillor Gallo: "I certainly want to see this extended for another year. In respect to subsidizing another contractor, I don't know if that would be financially feasible for a lot of people, considering we're talking about \$100 right now, which is tough for a lot of seniors to afford, and I don't know very many external contractors that would just come just to do a windrow only. Usually, you would hire them for the winter season to remove snow from your driveway in the windrow, and that costs probably between \$800 and \$1,500 for the season. I doubt that \$100 subsidy from the Town is going to go very far for anybody who wants that service, otherwise, they probably would be engaging in that service already."

By Brock Weir