

Door-to-door sales ban will protect seniors: MPP

By Brock Weir

This past spring, Aurora took steps to get tough on door-to-door sales; but now the Province of Ontario is poised to take things a step further with an outright ban on the sales of air conditioners, water heaters, furnaces, and water treatment systems.

Put forward by Liberal MPP Yvan Baker, the bill is moving through the Ontario Legislature and is particularly welcomed by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard, who says it will go a long way in keeping seniors from being duped by shady dealers.

“It helps protect our most vulnerable citizens, namely seniors who, for too long, have been abused too many times at the door in these categories,” says Mr. Ballard. “The second thing it does is protect the reputations of reputable dealers and vendors we have in this community.”

Seniors, he says, have repeatedly voiced their concerns about this, along with the children of seniors, many of whom have “horror stories to tell.”

“It wasn't too long ago when I was talking to an [Aurora] chap whose parents live in King City and he talked about how his parents were bamboozled into buying a \$1,200 water conditioning system when, in fact, the water doesn't need any conditioning,” says Mr. Ballard. “But that didn't stop the company from selling to their parents and really using some questionable tactics to prove the water was really hard when it wasn't. I hear constantly from seniors who are being harassed at the door by less than reputable vendors.”

During his tenure as Executive Director of the Consumers Association of Canada, Mr. Ballard says he heard these concerns as well and even long before that. Complaints and concerns, however, are becoming “more frantic.”

“It seems that not a day goes by where someone is trying to knock on your door and bamboozle you, quite frankly, quite fraudulently, that they are representing the municipality,” he says. “It was just last week I heard there were people going around in Newmarket claiming to be working for the Town wanting to inspect your furnace. I think a lot of legitimate companies and a lot of reputable companies in Aurora recognize there are more efficient ways to make sales than cold calling at someone's door. They are using advertising, they are using newspapers, and they are using the phone.”

“I have heard from my senior constituents who feel they have been duped. [The Bill] has a nice list of five things, but there are other [areas] that we eventually might need to look at. I am hearing about less-than-honest paving companies and lawn care services, home care services, high-ticket and very expensive items, and people who are less than honest in their sales. The unfortunate thing is that, for reputable companies that are out there, this hurts everyone and it hurts them.”

Aurora got the ball rolling on cracking down on its own turf last November with a notice of motion from Councillor Tom Mrakas. In his motion, he stressed the “financial wellbeing and personal safety” of residents as being of the “utmost importance.” He called for the Town's existing bylaw to be brought directly before Council to be overhauled, updated, and incorporate best practices from other municipalities.

Possible changes were brought forward this past March with Council approving a public information session in conjunction with York Regional Police to educate the public on these consumer issues, as well as updating the bylaw to be more specific on what constitutes sales people, and limiting the hours salespeople can go door-to-door to between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m.

Nevertheless, at the time, staff said they were concerned that restrictions on door-to-door would be difficult to enforce because it is a “reactive” situation.

“Staff is committed to the wellbeing of Aurora residents and believe the best protection and defence to unethical, misleading and/or aggressive door-to-door salespersons is to be educated on your rights as a consumer and be aware of suspicious or unwanted

activity," said Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Bylaw Services, in her report to Council.

"Door-to-door sales, solicitation and distribution of materials are transient activities. They occur at a given property for a period of time. Enforcement activities are either complaint driven or initiated by an officer where it is known that a violation has occurred. It will be extremely challenging to achieve compliance with a bylaw that attempts to regulate transient activities."

Nevertheless, Council forged ahead with the crackdown citing the positive benefits of more stringent rules and, just last week, Councillor Wendy Gaertner noted Mr. Baker's proposed bill and her support for it.

In the meantime, as the legislation works its way through the system, Mr. Ballard says if seniors have any questions, feel free to contact his office, or Government & Consumer Services.

"There are some very friendly people who would love to give them some advice about where to start," he says.