

Education campaign targets current and aspiring pool owners

By Brock Weir

If you filled your winter days reading up on the best swimming pool to get once the weather heats up, or are marking your days until you can rip the tarp off the pool you have, you might have some extra prep work to do.

Aurora has approved an education campaign targeting new and current swimming pool and hot tub owners on the best ways to discharge water from your outdoor oasis.

Council gave the thumbs-up to pamphlets and other reading materials to be distributed to homeowners following environmental concerns raised at Town Hall last summer.

According to a report before Council, chemicals like chlorine, bromine, and other products to keep water clear and inviting can wreak havoc on the environment if disposed of in an improper manner and when water is discharged into storm sewers, the treated water could find its way into nearby watercourses.

“Pools are commonly drained for seasonal winterization, and also when backwashing filters, when carrying out service and repairs, and when adjusting water levels following heavy precipitation,” said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. “In most cases, water entering storm sewer systems from all sources is not treated by municipalities and is typically channeled directly into streams, lakes and rivers. The low chemical concentrations typically maintained in an individual swimming pool under normal operation conditions are harmless to humans.

“Nevertheless, results of recent scientific studies have indicated that levels of some contaminants found in various fresh water lakes have been building up over the past several decades. In an effort to minimize the cumulative long term environmental impact of the combined wastewater released into the eco system from a large number of backyard swimming pools, some municipalities have enacted additional regulatory measures in order to restrict its direct discharge to storm sewers and the environment.”

Public education is the first step in tackling this issue before a more stringent phase, in the form of a bylaw, might come before Council. Before the end of April, messages being driven home will focus on best practices, including criteria that must be met before water can be discharged directly into storm drains, ways to reduce chemical concentration in the water, and equipment that may be purchased to minimize environmental harm.

The pamphlet will be distributed to new pool applicants, uploaded online, promoted during Earth Week, and mailed to all addresses that have received a pool permit in the past.

Before that happens, however, Councillor Wendy Gaertner cautioned the education campaign needs to ensure there is a buy-in from the community. She also joined Councillor Tom Mrakas who said a simple education campaign might not go far enough and the points covered in the campaign should be strengthened through a corresponding bylaw.

“This is a good first step [but] we need to be looking at the policy side of it and update that,” he said. “I am looking forward to when we get that draft bylaw and that component of it. It is important we update policies and we need to look after our water for the whole Town.”

Councillor Paul Pirri, on the other hand, was of a different mind. The implications of a bylaw might not be fully considered at this point in time.

“I have a fairly large concern with the way we're talking about a bylaw at this point in time,” he said. “I consider myself to be a very practical environmentalist: do what you can when there is something that can be done. My other concern is around monitoring and enforcement of the bylaw. This seems, in my mind, like a bylaw we would have a very hard time to enforce. If we are moving in the direction of a bylaw, I think there are a lot of questions that need answering.

?I want, based on principle, to agree with this, but there is a lot of work that needs to be done for it to be a policy that makes sense for the resident of Aurora.?

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: ?There is no perfect answer out there. You will find the majority of pool owners, like the majority of other people, are pretty responsible in how they operate their pools. I thank you for bringing it forward and I look forward to seeing what communications staff bring forward.?