

Golf courses win reprieve on Aurora's tree protection bylaw

By Brock Weir

Aurora's golf courses have won a temporary reprieve from being subject to the Town's proposed tree protection bylaw after Council voted to look to Markham for answers.

Council formally sent the Town's draft tree protection bylaw back to staff for further review last week, delaying a decision until February.

As presented to Council, the draft tree protection bylaw would have made golf courses, which are exempt from the existing tree removal bylaws, subject to the same restrictions as most businesses.

After a lengthy discussion, however, they opted to look to Markham, which flexes some restrictive muscles with their golf courses through management plans approved by their municipality.

'I don't feel we should have a straight-out exemption,' said Councillor Tom Mrakas, who proposed the motion to look to places like Markham. 'I prefer overall what Markham is doing overall, which is not restricting the amount. What they are saying is, 'come forward with a management plan and work with us.' I think that is a better strategy.'

For Councillor John Abel, an employee of Westview Golf Course, and one of the more vocal Councillors against further restrictions to golf courses, this was a welcome change.

'It would make them accountable for what they are doing on their property through a management plan, so it might be just the best solution going forward,' he said.

Calling for further restrictions on golf courses was Isobel Ralston, a resident of the Beacon Hall neighbourhood, whose concerns regarding significant cutting around that particular golf course sparked the extensive debate over the future of Aurora's tree protection bylaw which has now spanned two Councils.

Since moving to the neighbourhood 22 years ago, she said she has seen 'massive tree destruction' on the course with woodlots being razed.

'We chose to live in this area because of the mature forest,' said Ms. Ralston. 'At times, significant tree removal has taken place within very close proximity to our property, resulting in an incremental and substantial loss of the forest. Consequently, the view and privacy from our home has been drastically changed to the point where there are now essentially open spaces adjacent to our property where there were once previously dense woods.'

'As homeowners, we are justifiably required by the Town to gain permits to remove trees and have to place notices on the street in order to inform interested parties. Because golf courses are currently exempt from the bylaw, systematic destruction of trees can occur to make golf courses more viable for developers.'

In his own presentation on the proposed restrictions, Parks Manager Jim Tree told Council that meetings have been held with additional golf courses to provide them with all information before these proposals came up for approval. In the past, he said, there was opposition, but in more recent meetings to discuss the potential changes, the number of stakeholders in attendance has gone down.

For Councillor Wendy Gaertner, the perceived lack of golf courses coming forward to Council with their concerns was a barometer of sorts.

?I haven't heard from any golf courses [since the last Council term],? she said. ?Maybe this is the way of the world. We have tree items on our agenda that have to do with [tree] preservation and increasing our tree canopy. Maybe that is just the way it is going to be and all the golf courses are accepting it. I can't see any objection.?

Raising objection, however, fell to Councillors Abel and Jeff Thom. Councillor Abel, for instance, cited reports that have previously been before Council offering golf courses as integral in increasing an urban tree canopy and providing habitat for wildlife.

?We have 100 acres at Highland Gate and I probably heard from about 60 people with pictures, wildlife, and what we're going to lose when we lose that golf course,? said Councillor Abel. ?It is completely surrounded by residential, but everyone tells us that it is a wildlife sanctuary. Golf courses are actually enhancing our urban canopy. I can appreciate the comment they can butcher them and clear them so it enhances development, but that is the last thing they want to do.?