

Invasive plants impacting wetlands will be treated with herbicides: Council

Phragmites, a plant recognizable by its pale brown stalks topped by a plume, can be found in damp soils throughout Aurora.

The plants are an invasive species and very little can be done to fight them.

But the Town of Aurora will be working over the next few years to make the weeds as much of a thing of the past as possible through herbicide treatments.

Council last week gave the tentative green light to a new Phragmites Control Program, which will use a chemical herbicide for treatment, as well as controlled burning in some cases, to get rid of the pests.

Should the program be ratified at this week's Council meeting, the initiative will be spread over four years at a cost of \$75,000.

?Phragmites (common reed grass) is an invasive, aggressive perennial that can grow in aquatic and subaquatic environments, reaching heights of more than 5m and densities of over 200 stems per square metre,? said Parks Manager Sarah Tienkamp in a report to Council. ?In 2005, it was recognized as Canada's worst invasive plant by scientists at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. During the 1990s it spread rapidly throughout Southern Ontario and can now be found as far north as Georgian Bay and Lake Superior. It has become one of the most significant threats to Great Lakes coastal habitats, where it has drastically reduced plant and wildlife diversity, as well as threatened a high number of species at risk.

?While phragmites has a significant effect on native plants and wildlife, along with coastal/wetland and lake habitats, it has many cultural and economic impacts that include: damage to infrastructure; safety hazards; increased costs in construction activities and potential delays; aesthetic degradation and blocking of property views; reduced property values; loss of productivity in woodlots and agriculture; impeding access to important infrastructure and utilities; and recreational values.?

The report notes that Wellington Street and St. John's Sideroad have ?extensive? phragmites in the public right of way, and priority treatment areas have been identified as the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve near the Stronach Aurora Recreation Complex, the McKenzie Marsh on St. John's Sideroad, the Aurora Community Arboretum, and further east on St. John's towards Leslie Street.

?A sustainable long-term program will be required to manage phragmites to gain effective control,? said Ms. Tienkamp. ?While there are several methods to mitigate the spread, the most efficient solution is the use of a chemical herbicide appropriate to the site conditions, in conjunction with a controlled burn of the biomass. Successful control of phragmites over the long-term will require an integrated, large-scale implementation plan that includes all necessary partners and stakeholders within the Region. The plan will require sustained, multi-year funding, utilizing grant opportunities when available, to manage the realities of phragmites control, applying integrated pest management techniques.?

While Aurora has previously passed a bylaw prohibiting the use of chemical herbicides, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Operations, said the Town could permit the chemical's use going forward or create a phragmites-specific exception.

?Council, I believe, back in 2008, were quite adamant about removing any use of chemicals by the municipality, so we have not been using any chemicals,? said Mr. Downey, responding to questions from Councillor Wendy Gaertner on why particularly problematic areas like the Aurora Community Arboretum had not gone down this road before.

Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who originally brought forward the motion for a municipal program to combat the invasive species, said she appreciated the recommendations on the table.

?It is so important to protect our natural capital assets and ensure that we're not causing any more harm,? she said. ?It is going to benefit the Town of Aurora residents like drinking water?stormwater management, and I could go on, but needless to say I am really

happy with this report.?

Prior to the meeting, she added, she reached out to representatives of the Aurora Community Arboretum to gauge their support of the recommendations and they too gave the program a green light ? with the caveat that phragmites-combatting initiative is a four-year plan with budget dollars behind it.

Councillor Michael Thompson was supportive of the program as well, but questioned whether savings could be had at the municipal level by partnering with other municipalities that are also struggling to hold back the invasive species.

?I assume everyone is dealing with the same issue,? said Councillor Thompson of the N6 ? York Region's six northernmost municipalities.

Mr. Downey said that they are always looking for opportunities to collaborate and it was an issue he would bring up to his counterparts in King, Whitchurch-Stouffville, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury and Georgina.

?There are always economies of scale,? said Councillor Thompson. ?If there's an opportunity to collectively work together, it would leverage our buying power and perhaps get a better price for all municipalities ? and if everyone is allocating staff to oversee this, there might be some savings.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter