

## Know what to look for: Education campaign could tackle invasive species

Invasive species are all around us, but many people don't know what to look for.

That could change if an education campaign from the Town of Aurora gets off the ground.

Council last week approved a motion from Councillor Rachel Gilliland calling for the Parks Department to work with the Aurora Community Arboretum on rolling out in-person pop-up education events to teach residents about the safe handling and disposal of invasive plants and insects.

Pending a further report from staff, this idea could be expanded to future community clean-up days where invasive species will be targeted along with garbage.

"Everyone concludes that actionable education is top of the list in terms of how to mitigate the spread of invasive species in our Town and in our parks and on our trails," said Councillor Gilliland on consultation with Arboretum leaders and other stakeholders. "I was very fortunate to have a tour of the Arboretum with John and Irene [Clement] who helped me identify some invasive species such as garlic mustard, buckthorn, dog-strangling vine to name a few and they taught me a lot about phragmites (a type of reed) and how rampant that is. Invasive species are becoming more and more rampant and what the general public probably doesn't realise is our parks, trails and natural areas are facing ecological collapse if we don't do something more proactively.

"Although the crux of my motion is really around invasive species, it is important to capture invasive insects at the same time. I truly believe with a hands-on approach is something that really helps people identify and ask questions and be a part of the solution."

You might pass by garlic mustard every day and not know it, she added, and once you know what to look for, you're likely to see it all the time and know what to do about it.

Council received the idea with enthusiasm, although some questions remained about the safety of residents if they're tasked with tackling them during clean-up days.

"This is an excellent way to educate everybody and take advantage of the Farmers' Market and other events to get the word out and help explain to people," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "My only concern really is the coordination of a weed cleanup day with the Town. I would prefer to get a report back for us to just help answer some of those questions."

Mayor Tom Mrakas also said a report would help answer questions related to the clean-up days.

"I think education is vitally important for us to provide residents so they have a full understanding of what's out there," he said.

While Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she wasn't sure the battle against invasive species "is a fight we can win," she said it was important to make the effort.

"One of the reasons I am supporting this is some invasive species are being sold in garden centres and online," she said. "We need to educate the public [because] some of them are very pretty and people don't recognize them as invasive species. Any way we can get the public educated and perhaps help with this battle it is pretty overwhelming."

Added Councillor Harold Kim: "I think the education of our population on invasive species is critical to the next step, which is trying to do something about it. If we can remove even one stem of an invasive species then that is a great thing."

The intent of the motion also received the backing of Director of Operations Al Downey who said it was a "great way for people to get into identifying invasive species" and knowing their impacts, particularly if done in coordination with the Arboretum, a

partnership Councillor John Gallo said was critical in his support.

Phragmites is something the Arboretum has been dealing with for a number of years, said Mr. Downey. They have tried a number of methods to deal with [it but] haven't been successful yet but that doesn't stop them from trying and I think that is what we really need to do: continue to try and work towards, first of all, educating and then identifying what the impacts of these are and any steps we can take towards removal and reducing the impact is a good thing.

**By Brock Weir** Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter