

Medical marijuana facilities raise questions around Council table

By Brock Weir

While Aurora currently has a handful of small-scale, licensed medical marijuana grow-ops, the question on Council's mind is whether these businesses should be able to go big or tell newcomers to go home.

Last year, Council enacted an interim control bylaw to prevent any incoming medical marijuana production facilities (MMPF) coming into Aurora before the matter – including potential locations – could be fully investigated by Town Hall. The move was in response to one producer raising questions on whether such a facility would be permitted within Aurora's industrial areas.

This interim control bylaw is set to expire at the end of next month, and now it's time for Council to make the next move.

Municipal staff have earmarked three possible locations for allowing MMPFs within Aurora's industrial areas, including one location near the bottom of Industrial Parkway South, and two plots in the incoming Leslie Street business park on either side of Wellington Street East.

“The location of MMPFs in industrial zones has been a challenge for numerous municipalities since new regulations came into effect,” said Fausto Filipetto, Senior Policy Planner for the Town in a report before Mayor and Council last week. “Several municipalities have passed zoning bylaw amendments to regulate MMPFs by restricting them to certain zones and requiring appropriate setbacks to residential zones or sensitive uses.”

The challenge facing Aurora is similar to studies currently being undertaken in Newmarket and East Gwillimbury, he noted, and Richmond Hill has already passed a regulating bylaw restricting MMPFs to industrial zones, away from arterial roads, and a minimum of 70 metres from “sensitive land use”, defined as homes, schools, parks, and places of worship.

Richmond Hill also prohibits on-site retail and outdoor storage of product.

Council agreed on a 6 – 2 vote (Councillor Jeff Thom was not in attendance) to bring forward a proposed bylaw to a future General Committee meeting, but brought forward several concerns for staff consideration. Among these were security issues.

In his report, Mr. Filipetto said security is a primary concern across the board and Federal regulations state that such facilities must be monitored and recorded at all times, include intrusion detection systems, restricted access, and fencing.

The fencing issue was something that raised alarm bells for Councillor Michael Thompson, who voted against the motion. Other communities, he said, are grappling with concerns over wire fencing, which is seen by some in surrounding areas to be “prison-like”, including barbed wire to keep out intruders.

Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning, said that was one issue that would need further investigation from staff. While he said he appreciated concerns over “unsightly” fences, the Town has the authority to legislate the type of fencing required, including buffers from the surrounding areas. If plans go forward to include a MMPF in the business park, it would be in an “interior” location, rather than a lot with 404 frontage.

“We understand there is a requirement on that end and security is paramount, but as long as we have an avenue through landscaping to buffer it because we don't want it to impact other users or potential users,” said Councillor Thompson of incoming businesses, before questioning the impact herbicide and pesticide use by such a facility would have on surrounding wellheads.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner also raised issues, including the level of employment such a venture would have on Aurora's business lands.

?There has been a lot in the media, and I believe it to be true, about the importance and the validity and the use of medical marijuana,? she said. ?My concern is we don't have a lot of employment land and this would be like having a very large garden centre which doesn't employ very many people and a lot of it would be technically controlled with respect to climate and water.

?I don't like the idea of using the little employment land we have left that could bring in a lot of employees per square foot. I am opposed to it just on that principle.?

Other Councillors did not share the same concerns. Councillor Paul Pirri, for instance, said this would be a better way forward than the handful of small-scale licensed home growers Aurora has now.

?We do have smaller, more informal facilities licensed in Town, so those ones aren't as safe because they are put into units and people have smaller permits to grow,? he said. ?There is more security, there is more safety and, to be honest, I really like the fact the York Regional Police headquarters falls [near the second proposed site] so if we can put it as close to the headquarters as possible, I think we would do a good job of deterring anybody who has any nefarious thoughts.

?I think we're being proactive about this. We're setting out some locations and solutions.?