

More needs to be done to fight invasive species in local green spaces: Councillor

With their tall stock topped with a billowing plume, phragmites are hard to miss on the average stroll around Aurora.

While some might think they add a bit of interest to local trails and ponds, they're invasive species which can cause considerable damage.

According to Council, further options need to be examined, including the increased use of certain herbicides, to nip the pests in the bud.

Council last week unanimously approved a motion from Councillor Rachel Gilliland tasking staff with coming up with a list of options that could be pursued to keep the plants at bay.

Phragmites has been recognized as one of Canada's worst invasive plants that threaten the existence of meaningful wetlands and ecosystems, said Councillor Gilliland in her motion. Wetlands are vital ecosystems that contribute to biodiversity, purifying water, reducing flooding and are an identified asset to help fight against climate change.

Phragmites is known to thrive in our wetlands causing all other life to be choked out by outcompeting native wetland plants, leaving frogs and turtles without vital habitat, and blocking shoreline views and access.

The plant, she added, has been identified as a known threat in such local nature features as the Aurora Community Arboretum, the McKenzie Marsh, Salamander Pond, and the David Tomlinson Nature Preserve.

Speaking to her motion at the table last Tuesday night, Councillor Gilliland said phragmites can block drainage ditches, impede farming, damage asphalt, obscure views for landowners and drivers on the road, and, when the stocks dry out in fall, could be a fire hazard.

It's an aggressive plant that spreads quickly and releases toxins from its roots into the soil to hinder or kill surrounding plants, chokes out native habitat, leaving our wetlands pretty much dead and useless, she said. Clearly, there is a reason why this plant was crowned the worst invasive species in Canada and I truly believe it will be very beneficial to get a handle on the areas of concerns in Aurora and learn what [staff might present to] help remedy the situation.

Attempts have been made to control the plant by volunteers with the Aurora Community Arboretum with little success, said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Operations. That being said, however, there are further methods that Council could explore.

We have in the past, particularly through the Arboretum, attempted to control it, said Mr. Downey. They have cut it, they have dug it up, they have smothered it, they have done everything they possibly can to try to limit the spread or kill this particular plant. It is a complicated plant because it spreads three ways: seeds, rhizomes and through actual cut portions of the plant [taking root] again.

It's an extremely difficult plant to try to control. We have done some research on it, we're not quite sure what the answer is, but this report will give us an opportunity to bring this issue forward to Council, identify areas within the Town where it is, and also outline some measures in which to perhaps control it. One of our major obstacles with regards to this is our limitation in the control. It could very well effectively be controlled by spraying, but [we] have a bylaw against it. That would take a repealing of the bylaw or something along those lines. Perhaps we then look at a pilot area or something along those lines.

These potential options were warmly welcomed by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said phragmites' aggressiveness is plain to anyone who takes a stroll through the Arboretum.

If there is anything we can do that would be great, said Councillor Gaertner. My understanding is the Arboretum has tried

everything short of what you said. It's an impossible situation but it does do a lot of damage. We would really appreciate knowing if there is something we can do, how much it would cost, the potential success rate, and [spray] if the government will allow us.

?If golf courses are allowed to do it (spray), I think certainly municipalities in the name of protecting the environment should be able to use the chemical, but I am not sure what kind of damage that would do.?

A report is intended to come back in front of Council before the end of the term in September, said Mr. Downey.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter