

Plans to save Aurora's ash trees turn from streets to parks



By Brock Weir

As 2013 came to a close, Aurora was just one York Region municipality gearing up to spend money on treating street trees that would otherwise be killed by the Emerald Ash Borer.

In the wake of the pre-Christmas ice storm, however, a storm which snapped off many of the trees due to be put on life support, focus is now turning to save not just the remaining street trees, but also those in parks.

Councillors approved a plan last week which would extend Aurora's previously approved program to treat municipal ash trees with the chemical TreeAzin, which is promised to prevent infestation of the invasive beetles in otherwise healthy ash trees, into mature trees in Aurora's public parks.

According to a report from Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, last summer saw the first real effects of the Emerald Ash Borer (EAB) in Aurora, with the "rapid decline of many ash trees" being observed on parks and with street trees. So far, 75 trees have already been removed.

The new plan would not treat any trees already impacted by the EAB and, at this moment, that would make between 30 and 50 percent of trees ineligible for treatment.

"It may well be that further impact will be observed in the spring and summer of 2014 and render many ash trees in parks untreatable based on the advanced damage that these trees have already sustained," said Mr. Downey, noting trees that seemed healthy last spring were dead by fall.

Therefore, he argued, if such a program is approved, it should be done as soon as possible.

So far, staff have earmarked 386 trees to be treated at a cost of \$38,556.

Prior to last week's Council meeting, Councillors John Abel and Wendy Gaertner agreed that just under \$100 to potentially save each tree was money well spent, but others "Councillor Evelyn Buck in particular" had reservations. These were reservations she reiterated last week.

There has to be a point where Aurora stops the treatment, considering how fast the invasive beetles can decimate trees. "I think it is a losing battle and we are just pissing money away," said Councillor Buck at the Committee level.

Last week, she came back with the same arguments, but this time armed with numbers from Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation Services, that nearly 100 per cent of the street trees lost in the storm were ash. How many of these, however, had already been treated in the first round of TreeAzin, however, he couldn't say.

"I don't see this as a sensible thing to do with our resources," concluded Councillor Buck. "We're told the climate is changing and we can anticipate [ice storms] in the future. We cannot have any guarantee we have control over nature. This is an example of [the principle] of throw money at it and you can exercise almighty control over everything."

Mr. Downey, on the other hand, said there are tell-tale signs which gives staff the indication of candidate trees. As long as they look healthy, there is still a fighting chance.

"If we find it is showing signs of decline and clearly it has some issues, we are not going to take that chance," said Mr. Downey. "With regards to which trees we pick up and which ones we don't we are looking for trees within our parks and within the arboretum that show healthy signs of growth and would have a negative impact on the park and open space if it was gone."

Responding to Councillor Buck's comments, Councillor Michael Thompson argued that, no matter how you slice it, there was going to be an expense. Trees are going to die. Dead trees will have to be removed and replacement trees, due to grow in nurseries arranged by the Town, will have to be planted. Each step comes with a cost.

"To me, it almost seems like it is revenue neutral in the sense that if we don't treat these trees, they die and staff have to go out and deal with it," said Councillor Thompson. "We're going to spend \$38,000 on staff time alone digging up these trees and dealing with them. There is going to be a cost either way. Either we treat them or we don't."

The treatment program was approved 8 ? 1 with Councillor Buck being the dissenting vote.