

Reimbursement program explored for winter windrow pilot

Efforts to extend Aurora's pilot windrow snow removal program into the 2025-2026 winter season continue as Council explores a reimbursement program for eligible residents who hire a private service.

That was a recommendation going into this month's Committee of the Whole meeting from Matthew Volpintesta, Manager of Parks & Fleet. In his report, Volpintesta recommended Council greenlight a pilot financial assistance program offering reimbursement to eligible residents, but Council held off making a decision pending potential further funding models.

A financial assistance model is a precedented option to help seniors and residents with disabilities cover snow removal costs while delivering a program which reduces risk and offers greater user satisfaction, said Volpintesta in his report, noting that such a model is currently used by East Gwillimbury and beyond York Region. Under this model, a resident would secure their own private contractor and provide proof of service to the municipality at the end of the season to qualify for the grant.

To minimize financial uncertainty to the Operating Budget, this program could be implemented with a participant cap. For example, a cap of 500 residents, at \$150 per address, would result in a maximum program cost to the Town of \$75,000. On average, private contracting services are estimated at \$15 - \$20 per event, which would be around \$120 total if measured for the eight events that were incurred last season.

Looking at last year's numbers, had such a model been put in place ahead of the winter of 2024-2025, costs to the Town would have been \$76,600 to cover the program versus the actual \$91,154.

Should Council adopt it, the report noted residents would be able to customize the service to best suit their needs, but lawmakers expressed doubts that private contractors would take on clients to solely tackle the windrows.

I would gather that for the cost of someone to have a private contractor come in and clear a driveway and a windrow is probably between \$800 and \$1,500 a driveway just in today's market. If we were to subsidize that, it would actually put the residents in a worse economic situation, said Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

While she said the recommendation was not a bad one, there was a lot more work to be done to explore that including the exploration of partnerships, and issuing an RFP with a private company so the Town can ensure a subsidized rate and residents aren't taken advantage of.

It would be kind of an exclusive external company that would provide this service to where individuals could qualify for that subsidy program, so I do think there is some potential there, but I'm just not really quite sure what this looks like. I honestly don't know if we're ready for that type of partnership at this stage where we are in the season. I don't want to leave people on the hook at the last minute now. I know companies are already taking bookings for their winter season now, and it would be leaving a lot of people on the hook, not knowing how to budget themselves for the season, knowing that this pilot project is here.

The Councillor put forward an alternative included in the report which would carry on with much of last year's pilot program as it was, but with an increased program fee of \$250 but, she said, this figure was still too high for seniors and individuals with disabilities.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said he agreed a subsidization program could see abuse, but said he wanted to explore ways to make the windrow removal program cost-neutral to taxpayers.

I don't know why a lot of our taxpayers who take care of their homes and maintain their homes correctly should be on the hook for other people, unless they are disabled and can prove that, and they are financially disabled and can prove that, he said, noting staff exercise due diligence to make sure the program is being used only by those eligible.

?I think that our taxpayers would be quite happy to help the most vulnerable in our community. Nobody wants to see a medical circumstance?. I am more interested in the revenue-neutral nature of this because I believe that homeowners should be taking responsibility for their home if they're financially able and physically able to do it, and it shouldn't be subsidized by other taxpayers who are doing their own job.?

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner suggested the subsidy program could have potential in Aurora, but preferred a model where the Town would provide eligible residents with a list of potential contractors in an effort to reduce some of the guesswork for seniors.

?I think it's worth a pilot program for one year,? she said. ?Unfortunately, it's all about the money and I'm sorry to anybody who is listening or [reading] the article that might be reported on this, but we need people to share with us the cost for us to do it. How much they have to share, we've been debating that, but I wouldn't mind trying this model and see if it works.?

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