

Sign bylaw changes give business owners more options

By Brock Weir

New changes to Aurora's sign bylaws are expected to give business owners clear options on how they can get the word out. Council approved amendments to the bylaw this summer, which include the introduction of one-year permits for portable signs, commonly referred to as A-frames, with a \$100 price tag for each sign.

Portable signs will also be allowed on private and public property in the downtown core, subject to liability insurance and an indemnification agreement.

Signs must not be taller than one metre or have an area of .6 metres. Setbacks from driveways, curbs and buildings are also set out in the bylaw, as are the times that signs must be removed at the end of a business day.

The formal stamp of approval on the bylaw is expected to be handed down this month.

The revised sign bylaw has been in the works since 2012, involving multiple consultations with local business owners.

Feedback from the business sector called for increased flexibility on permanent signs and a better balance for temporary signs between business needs and the visual appearance of the community, streamlining the process by delegating authority to staff for sign variances and the approval of signage through the Site Plan process, updating the bylaw to reflect changes in the sign industry and technologies, and providing clarity and consistency in the bylaw, according to the report before Council by Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Community Services.

[The bylaw] provides more flexibility and increased sign exposure than previously permitted, said Ms. van Leeuwen. The only component of reduced signage was related to A-frame signs. A-frame signs were removed as a permitted sign as there were ongoing non-compliance issues. A-frame signs were being placed on municipal property, were not removed at the close of business, create mobility issues if placed on sidewalks, add to visual clutter and can be hazardous during inclement weather.

The by-law created increased flexibility, enhanced sign permissions and efficiencies. The by-law did, however, eliminate A-frame signs as a permitted form of signage. Staff did undertake an education campaign by visiting many businesses and informing them of the new sign bylaw requirements. Some businesses [that] found alternative signage, however did express concern. Staff have met with representatives from the Chamber to present a proposal that would allow portable signs through an annual permit system. The Chamber was receptive and in agreement with the proposal and requested some other minor amendments.

One business owner who has been a champion of further flexibility is chiropractor Dr. Brian Moore. Ahead of the revisions going to Council, Moore advocated for larger signs being allowed as they were used before with no perceived detriment to the Town.

By the time Council tackled the matter, local lawmakers were largely in favour of the proposed changes, but the overall look of street-side A-frames caused some division.

This should come as no surprise to anyone around the Council table, but I am opposed to the changes that are recommended. I find A-frame signs to be aesthetically un-pleasing, said Councillor Paul Pirri before citing studies that suggest an advertising bombardment. I don't think people need to see any additional signage to indicate where businesses that everyone in Town know where they are located. I understand in a location like Yorkdale where you have businesses that are on a first storey, second storey or basement, the need to have some additional indications of where things are, but in Aurora I find them aesthetically unpleasing. I don't think they are required. If you look back to some of the comments made by the Chamber, it was indicated that only five per cent of respondents thought that we needed to make these changes. I am not inclined to make any changes tonight.

Mayor Geoff Dawe, on the other hand, said while he appreciated Councillor Pirri's viewpoint, a balance must be struck.

At the same time, I also appreciate that businesses want to advertise and they are always looking for the opportunity to get their name out there. Notwithstanding the delegates' request to increase the size, I think this might be a good way to start to look at how we might do a change that has been done in conjunction with not only our staff, but what other municipalities are doing and what the chamber finds would be beneficial to their membership.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner also had her reservations, stating that she didn't like the look of A-frames, but added they did serve a purpose.

I wouldn't mind trying this on a temporary basis, she said. The problem is people don't take their signs down at night and on weekends.