

Snow plow service status quo after complaints

By Brock Weir

If you were hoping for improved street plowing after December snow storms left many Aurora neighbourhoods waiting for a full cleanup, you might be out of luck ? at least for this winter season.

Aurora doesn't have the resources in place to return to previous snow plowing service levels, according to CAO Doug Nadorozny. Mr. Nadorozny told Council last week the Town currently does not have the resources at its disposal to change the current threshold at which snow plows are deployed to secondary streets from the current 8 cm to the previous threshold of 5 cm, a level last in place for the 2013-2014 winter season.

The CAO was responding to a motion from Councillor Tom Mrakas calling on Council to re-instate the old levels following ?concerns? raised by residents and businesses alike.

?Residents were driving around slipping and sliding everywhere,? said the Councillor. ?At the end of the day, it is not a safe atmosphere and it is not a service level I think our residents deserve. We should be providing a much higher standard. I believe it is our job to provide the best possible service at the best possible price, and right now, as it stands, I don't feel the service level for our winter maintenance is at the best possible service level for our residents.?

Councillor Mrakas' motion to reinstate the previous levels ?immediately?, however, failed on several fronts ? including Council members questioning what budgetary impacts such a move would have on municipal coffers and, in turn, the taxpayer. The matter was ultimately referred to Aurora's Finance Advisory Committee for further consideration ahead of the next budget cycle.

?We don't have the resources in place to go to a 5 cm service as it is tonight,? Mr. Nadorozny told Council. ?We will run out of hours in any [snow] event with a 5 cm standard.?

Nevertheless, Council agreed nearly across the board that this year's snow removal program has seen its fair share of problems.

Councillor Sandra Humfries, for instance, said the previous Council's decision to raise the threshold to 8 cm was a mistake.

?We thought we'd take a chance, we weren't sure if the service levels would be impacted?and I had faith it would work,? she said, adding the change was supposed to see a balance struck between snow clearing and making sure resources were in place to ensure sidewalks were cleared in a timely manner. ?This is not about finance, this is about delivering the services the residents' need. Five centimetres? Bad on me that I accepted that policy in the last term. We took a chance and it just doesn't work. I am appalled every time that we get a little bit of snow. Our staff works really hard to get the best done based on the policies we set out. It is not staff that made a mistake, we did. If we, as Councillors don't feel this is a problem, then fine, vote. There is a huge problem.?

Others agreed it is a huge problem, but disagreed when it comes to dollars and cents. For many Council members it is very much ?about finance.?

Councillor Paul Pirri said the new service levels were adopted to address cost increases and there was too little information in front of Council to know the implications of going back.

?What I am seeing isn't necessarily a service level issue; in some cases, it is a common sense issue,? he said. ?I have heard from some residents that the snow plow went by twice on their road during the last snow event and both times they just salted it, they didn't drop the plow. For me, from a common sense perspective, if the roads have snow on them, if it is noticeable people would have a hard time driving on those roads, why wouldn't you just drop the plow, clean it up, and help to alleviate some of the concerns the residents would have??

You can't just ?snap your fingers? and go back without knowing what the cost will be to residents, he concluded. Councillor Jeff Thom had a similar conclusion, adding you need to have the best service levels for the best price, but the numbers need to be crunched.

?I agree with the sentiment that there are some core services we have to provide and we have to get it right every single time,? added Councillor Michael Thompson of water, garbage removal, and snow plowing. ?I share some of the concerns [raised on getting the full impact of going back] and I would also like to get a sense whether or not the issues we have been experiencing recently are strictly policy-related, or is it really about how we have been implementing the policy. That kind of feedback is crucial.

?I certainly agree that we need to provide the best service level, absolutely, but I would feel more comfortable moving forward with changing by having some of that information provided by staff both around how the policies are being implemented and whether that is part of the reason why we're having these issues, [and cost]. Perhaps we can find an interim solution over the next couple of weeks to help us move forward while staff bring that issue back, but certainly I feel more comfortable having some of those facts.?

Councillor Harold Kim, on the other hand, was succinct in his assessment.

?I am a little bit flabbergasted with the fact we have a 150 year history and track record and documentation of 150 winters that we still haven't figured out what the best form of servicing people in the snow,? he said.