

Snow plowing program to remain in place despite complaints

By Brock Weir

Residents have not been shy with their complaints over changes in winter maintenance this season, according to some Councillors.

But, a motion to return winter service to last year's standards for the remainder of the snowy months melted last week, with Council citing costs and changing service levels.

According to Councillor Tom Mrakas, who brought forward the recommendation to scrap the current standards of only plowing secondary and tertiary roads after snowfalls greater than eight centimetres in favour of last year's standard of six centimetres, complaints have been rolling in.

Despite a cost increase of bringing plowing back to the old standards, it is a cost residents wouldn't mind shouldering.

"I think residents, in this case, don't mind paying a little more for this service," he argued. "I just think it is in our best interests and I think the residents expect and deserve better service when it comes to winter maintenance. There are pretty much three things the residents look for when it comes from us: garbage, snow removal and the tax rate. I think we dropped the ball when it came to this one. It would be good for us just to return to the previous levels for the remainder of the season."

Supporting the motion was Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who said she too had been receiving several complaints over last year's numbers, particularly more than a winter which included the 2013 Ice Storm. When Council made the decision to decrease service levels last year, it was not expected to have a significant impact, she said. Going forward, she said she would like further information on the impact of going back to the previous levels.

The motion, however, failed on a vote of 6 ? 2, with Councillor Wendy Gaertner not present for the meeting. For those voting against turning back the clock on winter service, they agreed a further report was needed on the impacts of last year's change, but going back to those levels in time for March was another matter altogether.

"We made a conscious decision to lower the service levels because it was lowering the service levels or increasing taxes," said Councillor Paul Pirri. "The information we had at the time, which I do firmly believe, was we had the option of one or the other. I felt more comfortable leaving a bit of snow on the roads that people had to drive over to get on a tertiary street or sometimes on a secondary street, onto one of the main roads. It was a very large tax implication we were looking at, at the time. We are tasked with making a difficult decision sometimes and this was one of them.

"Is there a major impact on the lives of everyday residents? I am not sure that it is that severe, especially when you look at what increased taxation could have done on this matter. I am looking to stay the course."

In contrast with Councillor Humfryes, Councillor John Abel noted he had received less complaints this year on service levels. The recent cold spell has added to challenges on the road in that there is minimal melting before the next snow fall, but a decision to decrease service levels was not only made on a monetary factor, but also environmentally with less salt and sand being on the road.

"We have taken to a new way of providing sanding and salting," he said. "It is just a matter of people adjusting. I am not going to say it is not important that we listen. I support reviewing it and if the report says it is going to cost much more to move it, then we can make that decision at that time. I think people, when they see snowfall on a secondary road, think the plow should be there right away. That might be part of the issue."

According to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental Services, three new positions will need to be brought on board to bring the Town's winter maintenance program back up to old standards. For Councillor Jeff Thom, this meant Council "flying at the seat of its pants" if they voted to move ahead with the old standards because this late in the game they might prove unneeded.

Cost was not the only factor in reducing service levels last year, noted Councillor Michael Thompson. An additional concern was adjusting service levels to aid in litigation stemming from slips and falls.

According to Warren Mar, Solicitor for the Town of Aurora, the municipality's insurance counsel voiced a concern that Aurora's standards were above the minimum, and that increased level would be the standard they would be held to in court for these cases.

"The minimum maintenance standards is an effective tool for municipalities to limit their exposure to litigation and claims," said Mr. Mar. "As long as we have a policy in line with that, and we're in compliance with provincial legislation, it protects the municipality from those kinds of claims where someone says, "you should have plowed the road to a better standards than minimum maintenance standards," we're not required to do so. It does provide an active defence for the municipality around those claims."

Added Mr. Simanovskis: "Prior to the update of this policy, our standard was quoted as eight hours [for snow clearing] which we probably haven't achieved in over a decade, so that exposed us to huge potential risk if there was an event where somebody wanted to lay claim. We were anxious to make this change in policy and we could have stayed with the eight-hour cycle time, but that would have meant almost doubling our fleet. There is a real impact. We weren't meeting the previous standards anyway and there was a risk in not doing so."