

Snow windrow pilot program considered for some residents this winter season

Seeing the need for snow windrow removal services in the Town of Aurora, a pilot program is eyed for implementation this upcoming winter season for seniors or those with disabilities.

At the General Committee meeting on September 19, Rick Bagshaw, an Aurora resident who works for a windrowing and plowing firm that services Vaughan, spoke in support of the staff report for the program and provided additional information related to snow windrow removal programs in other municipalities.

As someone who clears the front of people's driveways so they can drive out, residents often offer him coffee and baked goods as a small token of appreciation for his service.

“How it works in Vaughan is after a certain amount of snow, the plows go out. Two hours later, the windrowing machines go out and we follow the plows around in sequence. It's a very efficient way of doing that,” Bagshaw said.

The two-hour delay before windrow machines begin their work allows for the initial snow plows to complete their “primaries,” he said. For example, snow plows may need to go down a certain street several times before it is clear, making it more efficient for the plow to have a head start to the clearing process rather than the windrow directly on its tail.

“I personally have never had a complaint about delay. Since we're fairly close behind the plow, the windrow doesn't get a chance to freeze. If you leave it overnight, it will freeze? We're always to the point where we ensure that the window is cleared before it freezes,” he said.

Due to several severe winter storms last year, windrow machines were sometimes required to work on a driveway a few times to clear off the snow. No matter the width of the driveway or amount of cars for the household, the driveway is cleared with the same level of efficiency and service, Bagshaw said.

However, windrow machines are not suitable for situations where there is no place to pile the snow, such as where there are rows of townhouses.

Speaking from personal experience, Bagshaw added that his wife often shovels the driveway when he is away. However, due to the natural aging process and arthritis, the task is becoming more difficult to do.

The City of Vaughan began with a 10-year windrow service contract. Pleased with the service, the Town offered Bagshaw's firm a contract extension.

“So, folks, I think this is the sort of service that the Town should look at, from at least the pilot perspective,” he said.

Another resident, Boris Gartsbein, provided an overview of the petition and community outreach regarding a snow windrow removal pilot program.

Speaking on behalf of seniors and people with disabilities, Gartsbein said that the task of removing heavy snow is a dangerous task for many.

“[Seniors] have been breaking their backs and having heart attacks in order to do so,” he said.

A petition with about 150 signatures was submitted to the Town of Aurora in hopes of creating a snow windrow service for seniors and people with disabilities.

"I haven't knocked on the doors. I just talked to the people I met on the streets," Gartsbein said. "If I extrapolate that number for a whole Town, there would be [thousands] of people who want this service. I'm sure that at least 90 per cent of seniors and people with disabilities want these services. Many seniors and people with disabilities need your help. Please do not ignore us."

Windrow clearing costs range from \$25 to \$140 per driveway, per season.

To allow time for the Town to implement routes and determine resident eligibility for the program, staff recommends having an application timeframe between October 15 and November 30, said Parks and Fleet Manager Sara Tiencamp.

The program, if approved at Council this week, would then initiate on December 1, 2023, and run through till April 1, 2024.

All occupants of a household must be over 65 years of age and have no other able-bodied occupants residing at the subject property; proof of physical limitations must be provided through a provincial disability permit or medical note, and applicants would also be required to attach documentation such as their birth certificate, senior citizen card, driver's license or passport.

Town staff recommended a windrow removal program that utilizes in-house staff, which would allow the usage of existing equipment and seasonally employed staff.

"If we do get the full uptake of potentially 500 driveways, we're confident that we can deliver it with the four staff that we've asked for seasonally to perform the works," Tiencamp said.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said he was glad to see that the pilot program is on an application-basis, especially because not all seniors may be interested in the program. While he is in favor of the program, he expressed his hopes that the program will not hinder acts of kindness between neighbours.

"We hope that this won't stop neighbors from helping neighbors, which happens on my street and many others," he said. "I'm really in favor of people still working within their neighborhoods to help each other."

Councillor Weese said he also hoped that the Town will not be overloaded with complaints due to the new program, as he has seen happen in other communities.

Tiencamp said that Town staff are prepared and have the capacity to deal with any incoming complaints.

Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim is also in full support of the pilot windrow program, saying that he knows several seniors in Town that gravely need the service.

Looking toward the future, Councillor Kim anticipates that the pilot program will continue to grow into a full-scale program in subsequent years and suggests that the Town make a decision that would consider their overall budget.

"I think the decision we make today, we're essentially making a financial commitment that's going to be much bigger than what we're seeing today," he said.

While many unknown aspects make it difficult to predict the costs of implementing the windrow program, it is estimated that the program would cost around \$45,000 (\$90/driveway), for around 500 driveways, the report said. A total of \$200,000 would be required for the whole service to support other operational service levels.

500 driveways is the average uptake other municipalities have found for their windrow program for seniors, Tiencamp explained.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo expressed his concern regarding the cost of the windrow removal service.

"I have no problems moving forward with a \$45,000 budget, which is the cost directly associated with [the service]," he said, adding that he fails to see the connection with the remaining funding of \$155,000 suggested.

Adding on to Councillor Kim's comment that the program could eventually grow, Councillor Gallo emphasized the importance of understanding the reasoning behind costs being provided by the contractors.

"I'm questioning the validity of the \$200,000 that our contractor is saying," he said. "So hopefully I can get some clarity on that, and the validity and cross reference with other municipalities on what they're being charged for a windrow program of similar size."

Town CAO Doug Nadorozny replied that the \$45,000 goes directly to the windrow services for the winter season, however the additional costs that total to \$200,000 are to reallocate staff resources to meet other community needs using in-house staff rather than external contractors.

"The reason it is \$200,000 is because we don't propose to have seasonal staff on standby," he said. "We propose in order to keep those staff and to make sure they're available, we would hire them on a seasonal basis and have them available throughout the winter season."

"The \$45,000 is that portion of the time, it is expected to be allocated based on an average winter, a quarter of their time, let's say would be spent doing windrows. But they'd be otherwise sitting around waiting for it to snow again, we would utilize them to do other areas where we're behind."

Municipalities are obligated to maintain road networks under the provisions of the Municipal Act, 2001, according to the staff report.

While MMS does not require a municipality to clear snow windrows at driveways, senior's driveways or persons with disabilities, the Town could choose to offer such an enhanced service.

The Town previously trialed a windrow removal program in the 2008-2009 winter season, but decided not to continue with full implementation due to little interest from the senior population.

Residents were required to pay \$70/annually and a total of just 39 residents registered for the program. A survey found that 67 per cent of participants did not find the program beneficial, 42 per cent indicated the service took too long and only 25 per cent would participate the following year.

This year, Customer Service recorded 50 formal complaints related to the Town not providing a windrow removal service, where the age demographic background of residents were not recorded.

The petition formally submitted in May to the Clerks Division supporting a seniors'/disability windrow removal program includes approximately 140 signatures from all areas in Town, according to the staff report, which noted that staff have not been able to confirm if the petition signatures in support were from seniors or those with medical or physical disabilities.

The Town will inform the public about the information contained in this report by posting it to the Town's website. Depending on Council's decision, the Communications Division will inform the public about the availability of a windrow removal program, or financial assistance program, through normal communications channels.

By Elisa Nguyen