

Some Councillors welcome 'tougher' tree protection?



By Brock Weir

Councillors remain divided on a new bylaw which would impose tougher restrictions on residents and golf courses looking to cut down trees.

The proposed bylaw was presented last week at the committee level after several developments in Aurora seeking to remove trees ? from large scale developments along Bayview Avenue to individual properties ? have received closer and closer scrutiny around the table.

Should the new measures be approved by Council, the number of trees one can remove from a property without a permit would be reduced to two from the current four. In addition, golf courses which are currently exempt from existing tree permit bylaw would be limited to 10 trees within any 12 month window.

According to Al Downey, the changes, while more restrictive, are also in line with other municipalities.

The tougher restrictions were received well by some Councillors who argued the measures were a long time coming.

?I am pleased with the direction this bylaw has gone,? said Councillor Chris Ballard. ?It is my sense that over a number of years there have been a number of instances where people have expressed concern about significant tree removal, not just on golf courses but on private residential properties as well. I think this will help clarify and really drive home the point I believe the majority of residents place on the value of trees in our community.?

Councillor Ballard also harkened back to a meeting he held with Councillor John Gallo with residents concerned over significant tree cuttings at the Beacon Hall Golf Course. There, he said input from neighbours was ?overwhelmingly in favour of a strengthened tree bylaw?. He rejected arguments from Councillors opposed (see over) to the bylaw that the new measures would be unduly restrictive on private businesses such as golf courses.

?Trees are so important to the quality of life, not just visually, but for all they do. What I have heard from Aurora residents is they want control over the number of trees cut. I don't think this bylaw is too restrictive. I just think that anyone who wants to cut a large number of trees has to apply for a permit and justify how they want to do that.?

The proposed bylaw was also supported by Councillors Wendy Gaertner, John Gallo, and Sandra Humfries.

In supporting the motion, Councillor Gallo said the application process was largely the same but the key difference stemmed in the approval process. Mr. Downey said the administrative process outlined in the bylaw would allow applications to be dealt with in a more time-efficient way as Council approval would often create delays. Permits would be approved his department but if there was an appeal process, only then would Council have the chance to step in.

For Councillor Gallo, this was an added 'layer of protection' for what was already on the books; but streamlining the process and essentially bypassing Council and that gave him pause, but the application process, in his view, is pretty thorough.

A window would still be open for golf courses to remove trees as they see fit by going through the process, something which he said was 'not too onerous.'

While she said she supported tougher measures and restrictions for tree removal in Aurora, Councillor Gaertner said she wasn't pleased with everything in the bylaw. Penalties under the bylaw were her issue. According to the draft document, an offence under the bylaw would be liable to a minimum fine of \$500, with a maximum penalty set at \$100,000. This, she argued, could give some satisfaction to larger scale developers.

'I know we had a situation where somebody cut down many trees and \$100,000 is, in some cases, not a lot of money,' she said. 'I would not like to see a maximum on that.'

Despite concerns raised by others, by the time last week's debate came to a close, Councillor Ballard was not swayed in his support.

'I think it is a reasonable expectation we're placing on homeowners and golf courses,' he said. 'None of us like to be told what to do, but when we live in a community and increasingly in a community that is growing in size, I think it is good neighbours and good corporate citizenship to understand that tree management is key to a sustainable community. This bylaw is a good step in ensuring that.'

'At least [we'll] have our staff review plans so they feel more comfortable and citizens should feel more comfortable that professionals have looked at proposals to remove a tree or multiple trees, or perhaps even hundreds of trees in the case of a golf course and see that it is reasonable. [What was lacking] was public confidence that at least we have someone with some ability to make those kinds of judgements in the community.'

One community member watching closely is Susan Walmer, a local environmentalist who was worked closely with the Ratepayers of Aurora Yonge South (RAYS) over their concerns stemming from the tree cuttings at Beacon Hall. She told The Auroran she and the Ratepayers have been working for 'years' to get a more 'progressive' tree bylaw that is in keeping with other municipalities.

'We were pleased last year with the work the Town was putting into it,' she said. 'They included a number of people from departments across Town as to what the impacts might be and I understand they did a very thorough job just looking at other municipalities. We were a little surprised at the reaction of some of the Councillors. We weren't expecting those reactions and we would have hoped that through the process we would have heard a little bit more about that rather than it being the last minute.'