

Tree cutting restrictions on golf courses will have to wait until fall

By Brock Weir

Another move towards getting rid of an exemption for golf courses within Aurora's tree protection bylaw will have to wait until the fall.

Council voted down a motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner last week which would have laid the groundwork for a discussion on whether or not golf courses should be faced with the same restrictions on removing trees from their properties as homeowners and other business owners.

Although Council recently voted to bring the entire tree bylaw up for review later this year, Councillor Gaertner's motion called for portions of the bylaw related to golf courses be brought forward for this week's General Committee meeting for consideration.

"We are in total agreement with the motion to bring forward a proposed amendment to the tree bylaw to remove the exemption for golf courses," said resident Isabel Ralston, appearing before Council in support of the motion.

Ms. Ralston has been an active proponent of removing this exemption for nearly five years. She was one of a handful of Beacon Hall residents who raised alarm bells during the last term of Council over large swaths of trees being removed from the property.

"As preparation of the draft tree protection has been an expensive process, including expensive consultations, we recommend, at the very least, the clause related to the golf course exemption should be addressed as soon as possible," she continued. "Although the other tree issues, such as the protection of heritage trees, are important, the magnitude of potential tree removal on golf courses is huge compared to the other issues. It is a fact that thousands of trees in Aurora [on] golf courses currently have zero protection and can be removed at any time without any notice.

"Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, because Aurora golf courses are exempt from the tree bylaw, systemic destruction of trees can occur in order to make golf courses more viable for developers. Removing this exemption would allow the Town and the residents the opportunity to be notified and be involved in decisions regarding tree removal on golf courses. This would thereby reduce any potential non-transparent preparation and grooming of golf course for future development."

While Council did not speak against the particulars of exploring an exemption for golf courses, some said they were puzzled by the "urgency" of bringing the matter forward this week. Timing, said Councillor Gaertner, is always important when it comes to the "potential destruction of anything" and it was equally important to look at this "as soon as possible."

Speaking first against the motion was Councillor John Abel. Although Councillor Abel works at a golf course, he said he would be in support of tree permitting on golf courses but, first, it was important to consult and engage "the principals involved." Moving the matter into this week would not provide the time to do that, he said.

"It is important we engage them and get their perspective on what this is," he said. "I have no issue with Council being aware of what they are doing on their lands when it comes to trees and I don't think golf courses would be either. [By next week] how are you going to be able to manage all that consulting to get a good, satisfactory, effective [consultation] for all parties concerned? It just defies our commitment to community engagement and communication."

For Councillor Gaertner's perspective, nearly four years of discussion on this matter was long enough.

"We have consulted with everyone," she said. "We have consulted with golf courses. They have been to the meeting. They can come back to the meeting. We have done a huge amount of consultation and I think we can go forward with this now."

Without a clear answer on why this was an urgent matter, however, Councillor Abel compared the issue to "smoke and mirrors",

noting that rushing things often raises issues between Council and residents.

?You have golf courses that are in full session, they're busy, the staff are working very hard,? he said. ?To say they have to come to the table in two days to be consulted is not realistic or fair. I have got to hear what it is why we have to do this. If there are hundreds of thousands of trees being taken down as we talk, that's what I need to hear.?

Other Councillors were just not content to pick apart a single component of the tree protection bylaw when the whole thing is due to come forward in September.

?I don't want to be taking bits and pieces out of this because it will never be completed,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?If we're going to deal with it, bring it all back and then we will go through the process, go through all the reports, and we will take another stab this term at redoing the entire thing.?