

Tree protection fight to come back into focus

By Brock Weir

A windy weekend all but brought down the curtain on the cavalcade of fall colours on Aurora's trees, but if these integral parts of our landscape took a final bow by Sunday night it was a bit premature.

Aurora's trees are set to soon come firmly back into focus as early as this week following a contentious ? and continuing ? discussion at Council's General Committee meeting on the future of the Town's tree protection bylaw.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner once again raised the issue last week calling on Council to make a firm resolution on whether or not to tighten up restrictions on removing trees across Aurora, whether on individual residential properties, in business developments or, most contentious of all, on golf courses.

The issue has been simmering on Council's backburner for the better part of two years following extensive tree removal on the Beacon Hall Golf Course.

This tree removal sparked concerns from residents surrounding the golf course, who subsequently brought their concerns to Council.

Their concerns, which won the support of some Council members, sparked a review of the Town's existing tree protection bylaw, and several proposed revisions, but hours of subsequent debate around the Council table over multiple meetings resulted in significant confusion and contradictory motions, leading to any changes essentially being mothballed.

?When this item was before [the last Council], we gave conflicting views on what we would like to see, to put it mildly,? said Councillor Paul Pirri, who chaired last week's Committee meeting, responding to Councillor Gaertner's efforts to have the original motion put back on Council's agenda for direction. ?As such, anything that staff would be bringing forward would in some way be entering into the debate because it would be choosing one side over the other side.?

It was ?unfair?, he said, to put staff in that position because it would task staff with wading through a sea of contradictions.

This did not satisfy Councillor Gaertner who said after serving on Council for twelve years, she has seen several motions of this nature come and go, invariably coming back to Council for direction rather than to simply ?receive? without taking any action.

?I find this very insulting to me [and] all the work I have done on this, and all the work that Council has done on this since 2011,? she said. ?The intent ? and, yes, we were remiss [when] we sent it back to staff without any direction ? but this is a Council process started by this Council, a fully public process with full consultation, public and stakeholders.

?I know there was a comment last time that perhaps the golf courses hadn't been consulted fully, but I have checked with staff and they have. We have gone all the way through this public process for three years and our Council motion is just somewhere in limbo. This was my attempt to bring it back to the table. If this attempt is not going to be successful in doing that, I would like to know from staff and our CAO what has to be done to bring this discussion back to the table.?

Answering this was left up to interim CAO Patrick Moyle, who agreed a lot work had been done in drafting a new tree protection bylaw, and a number of options were left available to Council.

Members go into this week's Council meeting with a recommendation to bring the tree bylaw, and everything that goes with it, back wholesale for discussion on November 17.

?I think there are members of the public who intend to come next week,? said Councillor Gaertner. ?The last time staff brought it back, they did give us options, but they also said at the time, as far as they were concerned, they had fulfilled their mandate, which was to bring forward to Council the best tree protection bylaw they could present to us from all their research and I do know a lot of

work went into that. There are [now] three new Councillors. I am not sure if they would feel comfortable with just having one meeting to discuss and decide how they feel about it.?

Whichever way the discussion turns, those Councillors who are old hands at this debate are ready to go ? particularly Councillor John Abel, who is an employee of an Aurora golf course, and has emerged as one of Council's strongest proponents of keeping golf courses exempt from existing tree protection bylaws.

?I compared all my notes from before, and more, and I look forward to it,? he said.

Added Mayor Geoff Dawe: ?I can safely say I agree with Councillor Abel. I think we have beaten this to death and I see no benefit in moving it forward.?