

Tree replacement following ice storm clocks in at \$88,000



(Members of the Aurora Community Arboretum, including environmentalist David Tomlinson, above, helped spark some new growth at the Arboretum's annual spring planting day on Saturday. Auroran photo by David Falconer)

By Brock Weir

An \$88,000 plan to replace 125 street trees felled during the pre-Christmas Ice Storm is expected to be approved at Council this week.

Councillors signed off on the plan at the committee level last Tuesday which would allocate \$88,000 in additional funds to the Parks Operating Budget to remove and replace trees damaged in the storm. According to Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, the months since the storm have focused on cleaning up downed branches and badly damaged trees alongside streets and within parks.

But, although arborists have determined 125 trees were fatally injured, many of those slated for removal were under closer inspection due to the emerald ash borer, the invasive beetle slated to destroy all of Aurora's ash trees unless chemically treated.

“With one or two exceptions, all but one of the trees significantly damaged or lost were ash species,” said Mr. Downey. “This has proven to be a very common theme among our neighbouring municipalities to the south of Aurora where the damage was more widespread and involved many more trees than were lost in our community.

“It has also been confirmed that 38 of the trees lost had received the first round of Emerald Ash Borer treatment. The remaining 87 trees were scheduled for the first round of treatment commencing in early summer 2014. The cost of treatment for the 38 trees was approximately \$145 per tree for a total cost of \$5,510.”

Replacing each of the 125 trees is projected to be \$700, breaking down into \$350 to remove remaining stumps from the ground and \$350 to replace the actual trees.

Residents, Mr. Downey added, have questioned progress on the removal and replacement of trees near their homes and those examples are still being assessed on a case by case basis.

“We will be putting in different types of varieties,” Mr. Downey told Councillors of the mix that will replace the ash. “Quite often we will give the homeowner an opportunity to have some say of the two or three different types of trees to pick from, but we don't try and go with a homogeneous mix in the community.”

This was welcome news to Councillor Chris Ballard, who said, as luck would have it, he was just waiting for the next invasive species to come along and wipe out the new growth. That being said, there was a degree of loss in the money spent treating ash trees which ultimately met their fate thanks to Mother Nature rather than a green beetle.

"There were 38 trees that were lost that received the first round of treatment for the Emerald Ash Borer, but there were 87 trees that had not and we budgeted \$145 per tree," he said. "One could argue there was \$12,615 we didn't have to spend for the Emerald Ash Borer and that is 87 trees at \$145. In my math, I put that towards the cost of replacing those trees with other trees.

"We didn't have to pay that out, so the cost of replacing them is reduced by a few thousand."

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, who has often spoken against the treatment of ash trees with the chemical TreeAzin, believing it was more cost effective in the end to simply replace existing ash trees than invest in continued treatments, replacing the felled trees will result in cost savings in the end. It should also give pause, she argued, for the recently approved plan to spend nearly \$40,000 treating ash trees within parks.

"The trees came out in the spring looking perfectly healthy and within weeks it was obvious they were dead," she said. "The ash borer had done its evil work. Most of the trees that are proposed to be treated in the parks with \$38,000 recommended will not be treated because they are already dead. We might be able to save money there.

"I look forward to another report letting us know we're not going to be spending \$38,000 on park trees and some of it will go towards this amount. This amount is all coming out of the special reserve fund, but maybe it won't all need to come out of the reserve fund."

Spring, added Councillor John Abel, will give a better picture of the way forward and the extent of what will need to be treated or replaced.

"I am all for [treatment] where we can and where it is valued," said Councillor Abel. "\$145 is much less than the removal of the tree and the stump. It is a win-win. If you can save the tree and not have to pay the expense of removing it or, in this case, the investment."

Aurora has applied to the Province of Ontario for \$282,000 in disaster relief funding.

No word has been received back from the Province, said Town Treasurer Dan Elliott, but he is not certain that everything applied for would be recoverable.