

User fees could be in the future for windrow removal program

Aurora's windrow removal pilot program could continue into the year ahead ? but with user fees in place.

A cost recovery model will be considered by lawmakers this week as Council weighs options to ensure the continuation of the program.

According to a report before Council by Luigi Colangelo, Manager of Public Works, 96 per cent of 460 respondents to a municipal survey indicated they would like to see the Windrow Removal Pilot Program continue in the future ? but this satisfaction could change if user fees are implemented.

?A majority of respondents indicated they would not participate in the program if there was a fee between \$75 - \$150 with 41 per cent not comfortable with paying any amount, and 56 per cent of respondents comfortable paying a mean of \$70 annually,? said Colangelo.

Sitting at the Committee level last week, Council was presented with three options should they want the program to continue in some form.

The first option would see the municipal staff deliver the program internally with the hiring of six additional seasonal staff, similar to how the program was delivered during the winter of 2023-24. The second would see the Town contract the program out. The third would involve the implementation of a ?partial cost recovery rate? for people enrolled in the program.

The first option would cost the Town an estimated \$253,000, which was calculated on 2023 costs based on 1,100 participating households. The second option was presented with an estimated price tag of \$325,000 based on a 1,000-household uptake or \$404,000 based on 1,500 homes. The third option is estimated to come in at \$143,000 for in-house services, \$225,000 if contracted for 1,000 households, or \$254,000 based on 1,500 households.

Following Committee discussions last week, Council voted for the third option of partial cost recovery, in a decision that could be ratified this week.

?I was open to the pilot program and to see how this played out and I really appreciate staff and the feedback they have received from residents through the survey,? said Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, touching on presentations earlier in the meeting that outlined a number of tax pressures that will be faced in Aurora going forward due to aging infrastructure and assets. ?There are going to be significant tax pressures this year and we're going to have to make some big decisions.

?There [are] a lot of social service gaps in society and I don't believe that it should fall on the municipality to cover most of them. I think we should try our best to ensure if we continue with this program? I believe there has to be some form of cost recovery?. I truly do empathize with those who don't have anyone [to assist with windrow removal] but I think we can only provide the service that we can provide ? and I think if we go ahead with it, I would be in favour of some form of fee for the household. I think a small, nominal fee?is not an inordinate ask. I am not in favour of having a second year fully-funded by the Town.?

Also in favour of further exploring a cost recovery model was Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, who noted that when Council first approved the pilot they were expecting up to 500 households signing up, but the ultimate uptake was more than double that.

?As we continue this as a pilot program to better evaluate, I am supportive of the idea of trying option three and applying a cost associated with it so that when it does come time for Council to decide whether or not this program will be permanent and how it will be paid for, we have seen both options and can make a decision,? said Thompson. ?I am cognizant of the fact there are some seniors for whom this might be a struggle.?

By Brock Weir