

Wait for snow plows was an 'operational decision,' says CAO

By Brock Weir

If you were left wondering where the snow plows were as you were trying to get down your street in December, it was an 'operational decision' at Town Hall, according to CAO Doug Nadorozny.

As current Aurora policies stand, 8 centimetres of snow have to be on the ground before snow plows are deployed. The last significant snow event, however, clocked about seven centimetres of snow.

'We made a decision to wait until the next day to plow, and that snow sat all day Saturday on the ground,' Mr. Nadorozny told Council last week. 'It was removed on Sunday.'

But, as Aurora had called a 'snow event' in relation to its on-street winter parking policy, where all drivers need to remove their cars from area streets when Town Hall sets the alarm, an 'expectation' had been set that streets would be plowed.

'The expectation had been set through the calling of a snow event that the roads would be good by Saturday afternoon and we weren't even trying to do that at that point,' he said. 'We made an operational decision not to do that. It is trying to find that sweet spot in something as unpredictable as weather.'

Responding to a motion calling for the 8 centimetre threshold to be dropped down to 5, a level last maintained in 2013 and 2014, Mr. Nadorozny said a thorough analysis would need to be made in terms of risks. Aurora could find itself in a place where, in a severe snow event, it would simply not be able to keep up.

'Our drivers are only allowed to log so many hours before we have to give them a rest period,' he explained. 'There are also so many hours they are allowed to work in any given week. In the old days, 15 years ago, snow plow operators would operate for 20 hours, sleep for four, and be back on the road and go. In today's law that is just not acceptable and we would be in big trouble with the Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Transportation if we tried to do that.'

When levels hit 7 centimetres in December, there was a further storm of 22 centimetres in the forecast. With the staff and equipment Aurora had on hand, there was worry within the department about running out of staff hours, he said. It was then the 'operational decision' was made to wait for more snow.

'That is what caused the frustration,' he concluded. 'We debriefed over the situation, we spent a fair amount of time on it, and one of the considerations we did give was to 'even if it wasn't a full change in the service level' we contemplated whether there was a need to have some additional staff to head off that kind of circumstance again and, in the end, it really didn't make any sense without a more thorough review. The thought was the likelihood of getting the exact same situation again with 7 centimetres on the ground and 22 coming, figuring out the hours at the end of the week, we're willing to take the chance we don't get the exact same scenario again and, if we do, we adjust it a little bit differently.'

'It is not to put off the discussion around service levels, but just to say that if the same thing happened I think we would handle it a little bit differently. The concern is [with five or six centimetres] we're in great shape. We will get out and get all the plowing done and everything will be fine. The real problem will emerge in the first five when there is 21 coming. That is when we have to figure out how to deal with the hours we need to maintain that service level throughout the snow event. If we say we have a five centimetre standard, we have to put in place the resources to make sure we can achieve a five centimetre standard and that is the part that needs more work.'