

Windrow clearing could cost upwards of \$1.5 million

By Brock Weir

The frustration that comes with clearing your driveway after a heavy snowfall only to have your access to the road cut off by a new snowy hurdle at the hands of a passing snow plow is almost as integral to the Canadian experience as maple syrup and peameal bacon, but it could cost taxpayers over \$1.5 million if Aurora wants to make windrows a thing of the past.

These are the findings of municipal staff who are set to provide a report to Council this week recommending against a windrow clearing program in the Town of Aurora.

According to Jim Tree, Aurora's Acting Manager of Roads and Water, clearing Aurora's estimated 18,900 private driveways of windrows could clock in at over \$1.5 million, but that is not counting the capital costs of securing the equipment to make it happen. Costs do not include the capital costs that would be incurred in purchasing the specialized equipment required to facilitate the program, said Mr. Tree. In addition, it would be necessary to contract the service out as it is done in several other municipalities due to the limited staff and equipment resources currently available. As such, it is a very reasonable assumption that the annual costs of a full windrow removal program, could exceed \$1,500,000.

Windrow clearing has been a hot topic in Aurora, heating up significantly over the last winter, carrying through the 2018 Municipal Election campaign. These discussions, however, have not been limited to Aurora and many York Region municipalities, according to Mr. Tree, have looked into establishing similar programs. Thus far, the City of Vaughan is the only municipality in the Region to make it happen, clearing an estimated 80,000 driveways.

The winter weather event that happened April 13 - 15, 2018, was one of the most significant ever recorded in that the combination of well below normal temperatures and the heavy accumulation of ice pellets over a very prolonged 48-hour period made for some very unique and unprecedented road conditions, said Mr. Tree. As a result, it became very necessary to plow the roads multiple times over a three-day period to remove an accumulation of up to 10 centimetres of frozen ice pellets throughout the municipality. Unfortunately, this led to significant frozen ice being deposited at the entrance to virtually every private driveway in Town and rendering many driveways impassable.

As a result of this, Mr. Tree added that Access Aurora (those fielding service calls and concerns at Town Hall) received 172 complaints from residents over the clearing of their windrow.

In cases where there was a pressing medical urgency, Operations staff was able to assist; however, these requests were minimal and had no significant impact on our resources or primary responsibilities, said Mr. Tree. Similar to Members of Council, our frontline Operations staff are well-positioned to understand many of the issues or problems facing our residents as staff are directly involved in the day to day operations, many of which have an impact on people's lives. The 172 complaints received represents less than 0.91 per cent of all property owners and only .03 per cent of Aurora's estimated 62,000 population. It is not assumed that the balance of homeowners and residents were satisfied with the Town's service level in this event, or that this single statistic is sufficient evidence to guide a decision on whether or not to implement a windrow clearing program; however, staff believe this finding should be considered in the larger picture surrounding this issue.

Filling in the gaps in this larger picture are potential conflicts with the placement and removal of garbage and recycling with windrow clearing equipment and how a windrow clearing program for seniors or medically challenged residents would be validated.

This process can be complicated and perhaps intrusive as very often a medical certificate must be obtained from the applicant's physician stating that the individual is not able to exert themselves, said Mr. Tree. While this may appear to satisfy the application process, it should not be considered to be effective in all cases and very often depending on the situation, a physician's note is not unreasonably withheld. Based on other municipalities' experiences in this regard, a sworn statement may also be required stating that there are no other able-bodied occupants residing in the subject property.

Council members will consider the matter at this week's General Committee, with their decision on whether to accept staff's recommendations to forego windrow clearing, proceed with the initiatives, or delay their decision for another day, ratified at the January 22 Council meeting.

Whatever the decision later this month, it is not likely to be the last time local lawmakers or residents alike will consider the issue, with Mr. Tree's report leaving the door open for further public consultation.

Vaughan's decision to pick up windrow clearing, he notes, came after a municipal plebiscite was held and residents voted in favour of both the program and the increase in costs, increasing the tax rate by upwards of two per cent.