

Windrow clearing pilot will make winter easier for residents in need

Seniors and residents with disabilities who struggle to shovel their windrows ? the often-heavy ridge of snow left at the end of driveways by passing snowplows ? will have an easier winter ahead thanks to a new pilot program approved by Aurora Council.

Council has voted to proceed with a windrow clearing pilot program for the 2023-2024 winter season, which will be funded from the Tax Rate Stabilization reserve to keep costs off the direct tax levy.

?While most residents are able to remove snow windrows on their own, they can be very challenging for others,? said the Town after Council greenlit the initiative. ?Under the new pilot program, the Town will remove snow windrows for residents 65 years of age or older or those who have a disability, with windrow equipment to be dispatched only after plows have cleared the roads of snow.

?Eligible residents will be able to apply for the program between October 15 and November 30 and will have to show proof of age and/or physical limitations. Staff will report back to Council later in 2024 on the challenges and success of the pilot for consideration and the potential permanent implementation of the new service level.?

Windrow clearing programs have, in recent years, been a frequent topic around the Council table with costs to implement a Town-wide program resulting in Council declining to pursue it further. A recent motion earlier this year from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland to explore various options, however, received the support of Council.

While Council members didn't dispute the benefits of the service, costs were once again a factor in the latest discussions as staff recommended bringing in part-time employees to handle this initiative and other services.

?This option considers delivering the snow removal to all eligible households by Town forces as an in-house service with existing equipment and additional seasonally-employed staff ? no capacity with existing staff,? said staff in their report to Council. ?This would also allow for the sharing of staff resources (during times staff are not engaged in windrow plowing efforts) to assist in other existing operational-related services that continue to be impacted by growth and changing service levels.

?For instance, Parks staff assumed cul-de-sac clean-up a few years ago and while it has resulted in an improved service level for residents in those areas, it has strained resources and had an impact on other services (forestry/ice rink maintenance). As the Town's tree canopy cover increases, and urban forestry matures, it is becoming clear that current staff levels are not able to keep up with the required pruning cycles as per our Service Level Standards. This has a direct impact on the health of the tree canopy, road/sidewalk clearance, residential properties, and other infrastructure.?

Ice rinks construction and maintenance has also changed due to climate and the global pandemic, they noted, as well as an increase in rink numbers.

The cost to bring this pilot to reality is \$200,000, plus \$90 per driveway.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo questioned whether these costs could be brought down by looking at windrow clearing only, rather than bringing on the new staff positions.

?I am fully in support of moving forward with a pilot windrow program,? he said. ?I am not in support of the costing that is part of this motion because the difference between what the cost is and what the budget request is for additional staff, which I am not debating we need? but it should be properly budgeted through our budget program. I am happy to see the justification for them. It should not be part of a windrow program.?

Staff, however, said the two issues were tied together as the resources would then not be available to carry the clearing out in-house.

?The challenge with trying to provide the services at a reduced cost is it would require us to get seasonal staff that would, in essence, sit around and be on call,? said CAO Doug Nadarozny. ?If we're only going to make use of them for the windrow program we only have to use them when it snows? [and they] would make that commitment to sit around and wait for snow and then for us to call them to come in and do the work?. The practicality of finding people to do that work on an on-call basis throughout the winter is very low.?

It was a matter, he said, of offering ?meaningful employment.?

The need for staff was clear, said Councillor Gallo, but he contended this was not the proper process to deal with staffing issues.

Staffing was also of interest to Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner who asked what any new part-timers might do when they're not on the roads.

?The biggest one in terms of winter is all the additional rinks we've added,? said Nadarozny. ?All those rinks have to be plowed right after they do the streets and they also have to be maintained on a regular basis; they're swept off, they're flooded and so on. We have never added staff for that [and] that's an area where people who would have done some tree pruning or some of those other things have been tied up with those activities.

?We can continue to do that, we're not saying we absolutely have to have more staff, but we're falling behind in [some of the areas]. This is an opportunity to latch onto the windrow pilot program and see if we can also make use of some of those to get caught back up on some of those other maintenance things.?

Councillor Gartner said she ?couldn't see a way around it? unless it was a contractor.

?It is very late in the year to even be asking contractors. I don't think we're going to find that contractor,? she said.

Further information on registration will be found this week at aurora.ca.

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