

Windrow removal program will continue this winter with cost to be determined

Aurora's pilot windrow removal program will continue this winter, but the cost of keeping the program in place will be determined this fall.

Council, in its last meeting before the summer recess, voted in favour of furthering the pilot program. Put in place last year following a motion from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, it saw a free program launched for seniors and individuals with disabilities to remove the heavy bank of snow that can accumulate at the ends of driveways when snowplows pass.

While the program was free of charge for eligible residents over the 2023-2024 winter, this year's rollout will be on a largely cost recovery basis.

The cost recovery model will see user fees charged to offset the cost to the Town.

A survey of participants (following the 2023-2024 winter) indicated that 96 per cent would like to see the Windrow Removal Pilot Program continue, said the Town.

Following the first year of the program, Council has been weighing several options on its future.

These options ranged from a cost recovery model, to the extension of free service, to scrapping the initiative altogether. While the cost recovery model won the day, however, lawmakers are expected to hammer out in the weeks ahead just what these costs will be, and for whom.

These questions were raised by Councillor Gilliland at the last meeting, who said different options on fees should be offered for Council's consideration as an affordable fee might be different from eligible resident to eligible resident, and the balance of what's not going to be covered through fees will come through the Town's Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve.

I think the average median within the Aurora survey was around \$75, but even if we started low at \$50 it would be nice to know what the low-end would look like, said Councillor Gilliland. I am requesting that we could also look at something [at] very low end and if it is something that is successful we could slowly increase [the fee] if we needed to.

That need is another to-be-determined factor as winters in recent years have proved anything but predictable; therefore, need this winter will likely be unpredictable as well.

The first time the pilot ran, it was a bit of an unusual winter experience for us, said Town Treasurer Rachel Wainwright-van Kessel. Part of the reason we want to continue with the pilot again, and pilot this for another season, is to see how it would go through what a normal expectation for winter would be. At this point, since we would not be committing to an ongoing program, we would continue to use [the Tax Rate Stabilization funds] until we put it into the (tax) levy because it is something we're going to proceed with on a regular basis.

Approximately 1,100 windrows were cleared across Aurora last winter over the Town's first three of four snow events. The program was administered through six hires at Town Hall who, in addition to working on the windrow pilot, also took on operational works all season, such as tree maintenance, park infrastructure repair, and outdoor rink work.

Beyond the costs, Councillors have questioned whether eligibility rules need to be more stringent going forward as municipal staff fielded some complaints that those who were eligible for the program and applied had somebody in their household who was fit enough to remove the windrows themselves.

Staff said that, as the program currently stands, residents sign a declaration stating they meet the criteria of either being 65 years of

age or older, or ?have a physical disability that limits them from participating in shovelling snow.?

?From the standpoint [of] staff, it is very hard for us to control or deal with it without knocking on the door and asking for proof ourselves,? said Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Director of Operational Services. ?We're going on the truth that somebody has signed and acknowledged that they are the only people in the house that are capable of doing that.

?Certainly, other municipalities have been trying to deal with this as well. It's difficult for us as municipalities to deal with that and prove it. Some municipalities have implemented a cost recovery program where residents are responsible for paying for the service, or a nominal fee towards the service, and that seems to help weed out some of the people that are, maybe, not eligible for the program or applying the program when they are not qualified.?

By Brock Weir