

Aurora to "partner" with golf courses as they remain exempt from tree bylaw

By Brock Weir

After a long and winding road, Council formally approved minor changes to Aurora's tree protection bylaw last week.

While the tweaks limit the number of trees residents can remove from their properties without a permit to two from the existing four, despite being the catalyst for the tree bylaw review in the first place, golf courses will remain exempt.

Instead, the Town of Aurora will explore partnerships with golf courses to encourage and incentivize tree planting on their properties.

"I believe there are partnership opportunities we can look at not only with golf courses, but with other lands in the municipality from tree planting," said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation. "There are partnerships we can enter into with our golf course partners for tree planting opportunities within the golf course to make sure we not only enhance but maintain our tree cover.

"In order to provide a tree management opportunity for golf courses, not only is it important to ensure the trees that are on golf courses are maintained in good health, but there is also a wide variety of trees within the golf course. There may be an opportunity where we can partner with them to provide that opportunity and provide them with plant material to that golf course in order to enhance that part of the tree management program."

To some around the table, this was a compromise worth exploring.

"We have come to a certain point where this is kind of a compromise," said Councillor Tom Mrakas. "While I don't personally believe golf courses should be fully exempt, I don't believe they should be restricted and have any punitive actions taken on them. I do like this aspect."

For Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, a lack of further restrictions was a disappointment – not just for her, Council's most vocal proponent for change, but also for members of the public who wanted to see some movement.

"This marks the end of a long process to try and get golf course trees, at least the ones that are within our municipal purview, under a protective tree bylaw," she said. "I think that was prudent and wise and would have sent a message to the community that we are committed to helping the environment wherever possible. It is true that Aurora's tree canopy is better than most, but we need to watch over what we have and enhance it. Yes, Council recently passed a policy that protects trees and compensates for them during land development. How unfortunate that this came too late for the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of trees that were cut down in our last development area of the 2Cs.

"I would like to sincerely thank the residents who came out year after year to support the effort. I really don't think that is going to happen tonight and I would like to personally apologize for that and thank them for their work anyway. In my opinion, we are going to put business interests ahead of community interest. To me, and to many in the community, this is a sad day for Aurora."

Last week's Council meeting also afforded Council members who saw no need for change in the first place, to also put in their two cents.

"I never found any major issues with the last tree bylaw," said Councillor Paul Pirri. "As I stated last week, it was an exercise to try and fix a problem that didn't actually exist. I hope that, although not perfect, this will gain a consensus vote across Council and we can all look to compromise on the matter. It is not a winner-take-all."

The matter was approved 6 ? 3 with Councillors Gaertner, Mrakas, and Sandra Humfryes voting against.