

Council mulls more water-friendly way to maintain local boulevards

Grass and sod might soon be out as the regular way to keep Aurora boulevards green.

Council last week voted to explore the feasibility of a xeriscaping program which could see boulevards going forward planted with drought-resistance and native plants in a bid for better water efficiency.

The move followed a motion from Mayor Tom Mrakas to report back on this type of system, but some Councillors suggested it could open the door to liability issues and ultimately prove costly.

Water conservation and sustainable landscaping practices are essential for the wellbeing of our community and the environment, said Mayor Mrakas in his motion. Xeriscaping is a water-efficient landscaping method that promotes the use of drought-resistant and native plants, reducing the need for irrigation and conserving water resources and reduce yard trimmings.

Xeriscaping on Town boulevards has the potential to showcase the benefits of water-efficient landscaping, beautify our community and inspire residents to adopt sustainable practices.

Currently, he added, xeriscaping is considered an encroachment under existing bylaws.

The motion was approved on a vote of 5 to 2 with Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo voting against the motion.

Explaining her position to Council, Councillor Gilliland said xeriscaping could lead to liability issues for the Town, more maintenance work by staff, and a Pandora's Box of issues.

Just having my horticultural background, it is a higher amount of work to make sure it is kept clean and free of debris, she said. You're talking about specialized perennials and plants and maintaining that, but I also have concerns even about the staff and operational costs to be able to identify what is considered a low-maintenance plant, what's a weed, what's not a weed. I feel this could actually open up a Pandora's Box because it becomes very subjective, it could increase the cost of staff and also the type of staff that you hire in order to identify the type of plantings.

From a legal perspective, the Councillor asked where liability would lie if river rock from the boulevard, for example, spilled from a Town-owned boulevard onto the sidewalk.

There were enough doubts, she said, that she didn't feel a feasibility study was necessary.

From the perspective of Mayor Mrakas, a feasibility study is a step where questions can be answered.

There are existing examples of xeriscaping in the community, he said, with one example resulting in a Notice of Violation to the property owner.

Hence why I believe we need to create policy, which is our job on Council, he said. We need to give clear direction on policy so our residents understand what the policy is, as well. That is essentially what this report would do.

This was a position supported by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim, who noted: I believe Council has approved many, many (motions) asking for feasibility studies. I think most of the [questions] we have will be answered by a feasibility study.

If a feasibility report is where many questions have been answered, it might answer further questions posed by Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese and Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

While both voted in favour of the report, they each had concerns about the practicality of forging ahead with a program.

Xeriscaping systems, said Councillor Weese, are often found in more arid climates.

"I am all for water conservation, don't get me wrong there," he said, also asking the amount of staff resources that would be going into the report. "It has significant impacts on the way our Town looks, if it goes through. I have seen a number of pictures elsewhere where this has been done and sometimes it is not very pleasant."

This was echoed by Councillor Gaertner, who cited medians on Wellington Street and a nearby roundabout as a few examples of less-than-successful attempts at xeriscaping that have since been changed.

"I think it was a good idea, but it didn't end up looking very good," she said. "I will look forward to a report coming back, but if we're allowed to do this, I think we need to have rules about what kinds of plants and trees are allowed, the maintenance, the property standards. I see this as potentially becoming a big drain on bylaw and not potentially looking good."

"There's the potential that it could look great, but there's the potential it could not look good, and then what do we do about it? I think there needs to be not only research on what would be appropriate in our area, but what would look good in our area. We need a lot of rules so that bylaw isn't inundated with angry neighbour complaints."

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