

?Greener Garden? challenge aims to increase backyard composting

By Brock Weir

Aurora's flirtation with clear garbage bags may have fizzled amid community controversy, but efforts to encourage more Aurora residents to compost their organic waste at home got a much more enthusiastic response from Council last week.

Councillors expressed their enthusiasm for a joint program to be carried out by the Town of Aurora and the Region of York, as it is touted to be both environmentally friendly and cost-efficient.

?The goal of the pilot is to increase awareness of the value of composting and how much curbside weight reduction can occur through simple diversion of easily compostable materials into the back yard, said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Environmental Services, in a report to Council. ?On an individual household basis, this simple change in behaviour could reduce green bin material by up to 50 per cent with minimal effort, while producing rich, organic soil for household use.?

A reduction of waste being left curbside in the green bins could save Aurora up to \$100,000 in costs. When it comes to hauling away garbage and other forms of waste, every kilo counts. If all goes according to plan, increased backyard composting could divert up to 250 kg of waste out of the system annually if just 25 per cent of households participate.

?Backyard composters will not address all green bin materials, so funding the right balance to maximize both the benefits to the household and the municipality is an expected outcome of this pilot,? said Mr. Simanovskis. ?The concept of backyard composting is long-standing; however, introduction of the green bin program may have reduced use of backyard composters due to convenience. The pilot project is intended to revitalize backyard composting as a viable component of waste management with the objective of creating valuable organic soils for home use while continuing to use the green bin program for all other organics that are unsuitable for backyard composting.?

Tackled by Councillors at the Committee level last week, the concept received an enthusiastic response around the table, particularly where cost-savings were concerned.

?If this is something that is good for the environment, good financially for the municipality, and I think is going to be good for some individuals because you're going to have a good compost to put on your garden and lawn?I fully endorse [this] as a volunteer program,? said Councillor John Abel

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

?I think this is an amazing idea,? she said, quoting the potential \$100,000 cost savings.

But, in order for benefits to be seen all-around, backyard composting has to be done right.

Developing a communications plan is set to commence this month, as is identifying community partners and others to assist in the rollout. 10 volunteers will be initially selected through the Challenge this spring, who will then be tasked to track and weigh what they're putting into their backyard composters. A further roll-out to the wider community will be launched this summer with the results of the pilot coming back for Council review by October.

In the meantime, there will be a degree of public education on how to use the composters.

?It is always great to do something for the environment,? said Councillor Tom Mrakas, questioning whether residents would be ?properly educated? on the ins and outs of back yard composting. ?If you don't properly compost, you could end up with a rat problem.?

That is already accounted for, replied Mr. Simanovskis.

?There will be an education program as part of this, as well as monitoring and reviewing their progress throughout the pilot period, [and] site visits to see how [participants] are doing,? he said. ?I think the key here is just to create an understanding that there is value in splitting your compost. When the green bins came in, it made it so easy just to go to the curb, but if you do it right, it benefits both the homeowner as well as the municipality. We're looking for a new balance.?