

More money needed to combat snow when it starts to fly this fall

By Brock Weir

It won't be news to anyone, with the possible exception of snowbirds, but this past winter was one of the most challenging in recent memory and Aurora is still paying the cost for bearing Mother Nature's wrath.

With far more weather incidents than what were anticipated during the 2014 Budget cycle, Councillors are set this week to approve a \$225,000 budget increase to the 2014 Winter Maintenance program just to get through to the end of 2014.

In a recommendation coming forward to General Committee this week, Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure and Environmental services, says this budget increase will, if approved by Council, come out of Aurora's tax rate stabilization reserve.

Further recommendations also cover new contracts for plowing roads and sidewalks through the next seven years.

When Council last met in mid-August, ensuring the municipality had enough salt, sand, and equipment on the roads to get the Town through another harsh winter relatively unscathed was a key topic when reviewing budget shortfalls. Money set aside for the Department of Infrastructure was just over \$565,000 overbudget, over half of which could be attributed to greater-than-anticipated snowfalls.

As you might imagine, we have had a number of additional events, said Mr. Simanovskis, responding to questions from Councillor Michael Thompson, about the budget discrepancy. We see 40 or 45 events a year, [but] we had over 60 events this year. An event is essentially any time that we have had to go out and cover the Town, whether it is salt-sand application or plowing. One storm might require two actual rounds, and those are the primary drivers for those cost increases.

Additional costs came from managing facilities due to the colder than usual winter. Keeping everything working drove energy costs up, he added.

We don't have any money to actually do any sanding and snowplowing this fall, Mr. Simanovskis concluded, following further questions from Councillor John Gallo on variances. Because the winter program is split between two years, we spent the bulk of the money from January into April and then from November to December. We have spent everything up until the April period.

Outside of the Infrastructure Department, the Town's overall financial picture is looking up, according to staff. In a second report, Town Treasurer Dan Elliott said they forecast a year-end surplus of nearly \$420,000, stemming from overall greater than anticipated revenues driven by activities in the 2C Development, which will bring thousands of new homes and commercial developments to Aurora, as well as general operational savings.

Leading up to last month's failure of the long-proposed snow dump for Lambert Willson Park, which fell on a tie vote, snow and what to do with it, had provided some cool thoughts around the Council table during the long summer weeks.

According to Bill Thompson of the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA), plans are underway to look at ways to whittle broad-based Provincial objectives of snow and salt management down to locally specific recommendations for all communities living on and around tributaries flowing into Lake Simcoe. This culminated in a sub-watershed management plan for the east Holland River, which flows through Aurora, but more plans are under review.

The Conservation Authority, he said, needs to work with their municipal partners to develop ways to monitor meltwater going into the streams, reducing reliance on storm water management ponds with an eye towards more permeable pavement and other solutions, and how to mitigate the effects of road salt.

While Mr. Thompson said he and the LSRCA supported what was before Council last month as a comprehensive plan, he added more work needs to be done for public education around the proper use of salt as well as mapping areas in and around Aurora that

are particularly vulnerable to the use of road salt.

'We're finding essentially sea water coming off the stones at those sites because it is a very concentrated source,' said Mr. Thompson of a snow disposal site in Newmarket, which was releasing what he described as 'surprisingly high levels' of chloride into the environment. 'It is something we need to address going forward and we're just at the early stages of identifying the way forward on that issue.'