

New garbage contract signed amid service concerns

By Brock Weir

Service concerns dominated discussions last week as Aurora approved a new contract with Green For Life for garbage and waste collection.

The contract, which will come into effect in 2018, is an agreement between York Region's northern six municipalities, which also includes King, Newmarket, East Gwillimbury, Whitchurch-Stouffville and Georgina.

As The Auroran reported last week, officials say the new contract includes safeguards for better customer service but one resident came to Council last week questioning why Aurora would go forward with another contract with Green For Life (GFL) in the face of previous problems.

"Garbage isn't being picked up on time, yard waste is sitting for days, it blows all over the place, and it is not what I think of when I think of Aurora," said resident Jim Helkie.

Mr. Helkie questioned whether the \$82 million deal for all six municipalities for the duration of the contract was the best use of tax dollars given complaints that have been logged along the way.

"We made a mistake here and it looks like we're getting ready to make the same mistake again."

Local lawmakers took his comments to heart, acknowledging there have indeed been issues in the past, particularly during the ice storm which hit the area just before Christmas of 2013, but many agreed that services have steadily improved since then.

"I appreciate your point, and certainly if you raised that question, say, in 2013, we would have been entirely on side with those comments because three years ago it was pretty brutal," said Mayor Geoff Dawe. "I would suggest it has improved. Personally, I have had very few issues from a Town perspective and I can tell you we get copied on most, if not all, of the complaints."

Indeed, this observed trend was bolstered by Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, who said complaints about missed streets went from 26 to three in 2005, and missed locations from 158 to 54.

"From a reporting perspective, we did have an improvement in performance, but still the fact is there are issues occurring," said Mr. Simanovskis. "I can appreciate the frustration of the residents who have experienced that delay or that inconvenience."

Councillors nevertheless asked for assurances there was a structure in place to ensure service levels are maintained and penalties levied in case they are not. Mr. Simanovskis told them that was an area of particular focus during contract negotiations. Penalty clauses, he said, have been rewritten to focus on previously identified issues and customer service was a "central focus."

"The customer service as a function of the contract, is quite extensive compared to previous contracts, and there are some very clear performance metrics around the customer service elements and that was done in consultation with Newmarket who have quite a lot of experience with the customer service centre," he said. "The goal is to ensure we have tools and mechanisms to enforce the contract and ensure the services are of the highest possible standard for the service we provide and we have the mechanisms to penalise the contractor if they are unable or unwilling to meet those expectations."

To address any outstanding concerns from residents, Councillor Michael Thompson said these performance metrics should be published annually "or have GFL come to Council to talk about how they are meeting the targets set out in the new 10-year contract."

"I think it is important to communicate that out to residents and let them know that certainly we expect a high level of customer

service and we're going to hold anybody we deal with accountable," said Councillor Thompson.

Outside of residents and the customers getting the service they expect, Council also questioned whether they were getting the best bang for their buck. Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, said he was less than satisfied with the process, pressing Mr. Simanovskis to reveal the details behind some of the other bids for this contract. This disclosure, however, would be contrary to the policies of the Town of Newmarket, which led the negotiations, according to Mr. Simanovskis.

When questioned by Councillor John Abel on how much Aurora is saving by entering into a waste contract with five other municipalities, Mr. Simanovskis said the savings were "significant" - a savings of \$1 million per year for the partnership compared to the previous N6 contract in 2007.

"We did get a good deal for the contract that we did get in 2007 and the partnership recognized with that deal that there were some challenges as well that we had to overcome with the contractor as they matured in their service provider provision practices," said Mr. Simanovskis. "This current contract is about 30 per cent higher than our current contract when it comes into force January 1, 2018. In looking at the value of the contract, we asked our consultant to review the pricing and look at industry benchmarks around the service, and it isn't unreasonable. The contract is competitive."