

Council supports 'made in King' solution to tree preservation

By Angela Gismondi

King has opted to implement a township-wide tree preservation and promotion program instead of a regulatory tree preservation bylaw.

At the meeting on May 28, council directed staff to proceed with the program and to implement a phased work plan which encourages residents to maintain and plant trees on their own properties. At the beginning of the bylaw review process, members of council and the public identified the need to pursue a 'made in King' solution that takes into account the community's unique urban and rural nature and strong connection to the environment, explained Alexander Harras, acting deputy clerk for the Township of King.

'Based on staff's review of the relevant legislation, input from the community and recent events with respect to tree damage caused by the ice storm of 2013 and associated cleanup, it is the opinion of staff that a regulatory approach to tree preservation is not the most effective tool at this time for promoting environmental stewardship and maintaining a healthy urban forest,' said Harras. Township staff held a number of public consultation sessions on the matter and the work plan was developed with input from the community, council and the Sustainability Advisory Committee. It is focused on exploring options that encourage residents to plant and maintain trees without the necessity of a regulatory approach.

'Overall we heard a wide variety of views to the tree bylaw so it was very helpful in that regard to collect that feedback from the community,' said Harras. 'We heard from the community that there is quite an appetite for other programs that achieve the same thing that a bylaw might and we would like to pursue that first.'

Consideration of a tree preservation bylaw began in 2009 when the matter was brought to the King Environmental Advisory Committee (KEAC) for study. Since the initial report in 2009, incidents of large-scale tree removal in King have driven continued interest in a tree preservation bylaw. The Region of York's forest preservation bylaw provides protection for woodlands and woodlots within King, but there is a regulatory gap for trees that do not form part of a woodland or woodlot and are therefore unprotected, particularly in the urban areas in King - Nobleton, Schomberg and King City. The intent of the proposed bylaw is to maintain and enhance the existing tree population and canopy, particularly for King's unprotected urban areas.

Staff have proposed a detailed work plan that will phase in a comprehensive tree preservation and promotion program. A regulatory bylaw may be considered again at a later stage of the work plan based on the results of the earlier phases.

The first phase of the work plan involves agency and roundtable discussions which will begin immediately and run until December. The purpose of this phase is to engage all of the Township's partners in tree preservation to give them a better understanding of the legislative tools already in place and how best to utilize them. It is expected that the meeting will develop clear lines of communication and responsibility for investigation and enforcement for large-scale tree removal. The responsibilities of each agency will be outlined in a document which will act as a reference tool for future incidents.

Phase two, which will be ongoing, is the community education program. Staff will develop a marketing program to educate and encourage local residents to plant, maintain and protect healthy trees on their property.

The third phase is to develop and implement tree planting incentives and subsidies. Township staff will look at several different approaches to offering subsidized trees for residents including developing an in-house program, partnering with local tree nurseries for bulk purchases to achieve savings and partnering with existing non-profits to increase services offered in King. This part of the program is expected to begin in November and will take about a year to complete.

Phase four, an evaluation and regulatory review of the program, will take place sometime late next year. This phase will examine the success of the prior three phases to determine if the activities have had a positive impact on the promotion and protection of trees within King, particularly in the urban areas. Based on the success of the prior phases, council will determine if there is a need for a regulatory bylaw.

King City resident Mary Muter, representing the Kingscross Estates Ratepayers Association, said there is an urgent need for a bylaw to protect trees in King.

'We support very much the need for a tree bylaw,' said Muter, adding the Aurora tree preservation bylaw which allows residents to cut down a maximum number of trees each year might be appropriate in King. 'There really isn't time for a two- or three- year education program. We need an interim bylaw to protect the clearing of lots for development purposes.'

While Councillor Debbie Schaefer recognized tree preservation is necessary, she said a strict approach which would require a permit for every tree cut down in the Township is not the right way to go.

'I've come to terms with the fact that the strict model we had in the beginning was not the right answer and probably wouldn't have

given us what we want," said Schaefer. "I do believe we are very vulnerable in the interim. To have this go on for another year or year-and-a-half I think is problematic. We need to do something."

Mayor Steve Pellegrini asked if staff would consider consolidating or compressing the timeline proposed in the report.

Council approved the staff recommendations to implement the tree preservation and promotion program with an effort to expedite the timeline of the phased work plan.