

\$8,000 charge stands to deal with fire last July

By Bill Rea

There was lots of sympathy last Tuesday night for a Caledon family dealing with a firefighting bill, but that was about all Town council was ready to offer.

Angela Parker was appealing for a break on an invoice the Town issued for \$8,081.25. This was in connection with a fire last July on Highway 10, south of The Grange Sideroad.

Councillors voted down a motion to reduce the bill, but did direct staff to work with the family to come up with a payment plan. She said her husband had started an outdoor chimney fire to barbecue some food and had gone into the garage to collect some roasting sticks. When he had emerged, he found the fire had spread, and he tried to put it out with a bucket of water he had kept on hand, but it wasn't sufficient. He quickly called 9-1-1.

Parker said her husband stayed outside with the firefighters the whole time. She added she was distraught at the time, but was assured by several firefighters, including the one in charge at the scene, that they had nothing to worry about regarding being charged for the fire.

She added she had seen no signs or indication there was a burning ban in effect at the time.

Parker said they are a family of seven. She's unable to work owing to health issues, and they are experiencing financial difficulties. They also had to deal with tragedy involving their two dogs. They put them into the garage to keep them safe from the fire, and the dogs got into some fluids there and died as a result.

'We have suffered tremendously from this fire and we're just asking for any mercy or any help you can do,' she said.

She added she and her husband were ready to help out with community work, etc.

CAO Mike Galloway told Councillor Annette Groves the Town doesn't have a policy for forgiveness or leniency in cases like this. There is a bylaw governing burning permits.

'It's really a black and white bylaw,' he remarked, adding if a burning ban is in effect, there are charges and outcomes.

Groves pointed out a lot of people might not have been aware of a ban.

'It's usually posted,' Parker said, adding she didn't see any indications.

Groves stressed she saw the point behind the bylaw, but wondered if there could be provisions to help people having difficulties.

Galloway said the Finance Department at the Town has always been lenient when it comes to collecting payment.

Parker replied that the invoice said if the bill was not paid in 30 days, it would go to collection.

Galloway said staff could help out in setting up a payment plan.

'Eight thousand dollars is a lot of money,' Groves declared. 'I'm not sure who has \$8,000 sitting around, even with a payment plan.'

Councillor Nick deBoer recalled council dealt with a similar appeal about six or eight months ago. Although he opposed it, a motion was passed to reduce the charge.

'I think we have to be consistent with the appeals,' he said.

General Manager of Community Services Peggy Tollett said the invoice in that case was for about \$1,600, and it was reduced by \$400.

DeBoer later said he had opposed that reduction because of the precedent.

'I don't want to say 'I told you so,' but I told you so,' he said.

Parker told Councillor Doug Beffort she had been worried and 'panicking' during the fire that there might be some charge, but was assured there was nothing to worry about. Thus, she said she was shocked when she saw the invoice.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli was sympathetic, but stressed there are policies in place, and it sets risky precedents when council starts picking those policies apart. He did support the idea of setting up a payment plan. He also said there needs to be penalties to help prevent the department from responding to unnecessary fires when bans are in place.

'Then may I ask that it be posted better,' Parker responded.

Mezzapelli replied such bans are prominently posted on the Town's website.

Tollett also observed that it's the responsibility of a person holding a burn permit to make sure there is no ban in place.

Councillor Jennifer Innis was concerned about the precedent that could be set. She also said there could have been important calls firefighters couldn't respond to because they were on this one.

'It's tough for us to make those exceptions,' Councillor Barb Shaughnessy remarked. She was in favour of seeing if staff could find some 'wiggle room.'

?You have to bear some of the responsibility,? she added.

Chief Financial Officer Fuwing Wong said they can help work out a payment plan, adding they can call off the collection agency if directed. But he said only council can authorize an adjustment to the fees.

Groves agreed with the need for consistency, adding if there have been reductions in the past, that might be appropriate in this case. She also thought there were extenuating circumstances in this case.

?I'm sure you didn't do it on purpose,? she added, suggesting a 25 per cent reduction, as well as revisiting the bylaw to look at possible exceptions.

Mayor Allan Thompson suggested this was not the time to deal with adjustments to the bylaw.

Parker had also wondered about the number of trucks that responded to the fire, commenting two or three of them seemed to be sitting there doing nothing. Galloway was not prepared to go into that, however. The invoice stated there were five pieces of apparatus sent to the scene, at a cost of \$691 per hour, and they were there for two hours.

?This was not a small incident, by any means,? he remarked.

Tollett added the fire spread over about three acres.

Galloway stressed it has to be left up to the fire department how many trucks have to respond to a call.

DeBoer was in support of working out a payment plan, but he agreed there are responsibilities on those setting fires. If recreational burning is going to be permitted, the public has to know there's a downside.