

Coming thaw will reveal real extent of ice storm

By Bill Rea

The full impacts from the December ice storm in Caledon are still not yet known, but Town staff are busy dealing with and planning for the clean-up.

Town council Tuesday received three staff delegations aimed at addressing parts of the aftermath.

Public Works Director David Loveridge told councillors one complication is that the exact impacts from the storm won't be known until after the spring thaw. He said there might still be surprises in the level of damage apparent after the snow melts.

He also said there will be the possibility of flooding in certain areas, such as in and around the Credit River.

"We're concerned about a rapid spring thaw," he remarked.

Loveridge said the top priority will be protecting Town assets, like roads, bridges, culverts and trees. The problems that are already apparent, he said, includes a "deluge of potholes."

As well, he said there's an obligation on the municipality to help residents move forward with trees on their properties that have to be removed.

The program that Loveridge put forward, which council accepted, will include an enhanced pothole maintenance program; entering into arrangements with private contractors for the removal of debris that could impact bridges or culverts, or cause flooding; entering contracts for the removal of debris at roadsides and in parks; negotiating with Peel Region to come up with additional sites for debris disposal; acquiring bags and sand supplies for voluntary sandbagging in places that might be at risk of flooding; and having the annual tree seedling program offered for free to residents who had to deal with tree damage.

Councillor Richard Whitehead raised concerns about the many long driveways in rural areas of Town, as well as culverts on private properties. Storm water drainage systems on these lands will have to be looked at.

He also had praise for Town staff and the way they have been handling the aftermath of the storm. Whitehead sits on the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), and he said staff there recently commented that they wished other municipalities were working as collaboratively as Caledon.

But there's also the concern that much of the Humber River system is in public ownership (unlike the Credit River, much of which is owned privately). He wondered if there had been much discussion of public liability.

Loveridge agreed there are challenges. He said there are some trees in the rivers, and it will take work to get them out before they block the water flows. One problem is with trees upstream that are leaning toward the water. It's hard to get at them now and remove them, so authorities have to wait and see what happens.

Whitehead also suggested Loveridge make sure there's enough stock for the tree program. Loveridge had said there will be an excess of mulch from the chipping of downed trees, but Whitehead pointed out if a lot of trees have to be planted, that extra mulch could be useful.

"You can't plant a tree and walk away from it," he said. "You have to mulch it."

Loveridge said he's been talking to officials at Peel Public Works, and learned that expanding the Region's yard waste program is not as simple as it sounds. The program is driven by the amount of equipment that's available. He added the solution to the problem would be tricky. There could be a program to go street by street collecting storm debris, but that would be costly. There could be a central drop-off point, but many residents aren't equipped to transport trees.

He also stressed that it won't be until spring that they learn exactly how bad things are.

Councillor Nick deBoer said there needs to be some help for people in urban areas to deal with the debris. He suggested summer students, under supervision, could go around with a chipper and deal with it that way. Loveridge said that could be an option, adding there are others.

Loveridge also said the rains last month provided a good test of what might be expected in the thaw. One priority, he pointed out, will be to make sure the catch basins are not plugged to ensure the water has some place to go.

Councillor Allan Thompson brought up the need for communications. Loveridge said there will be a number of media initiatives, involving Twitter, websites, etc. There will also be a central phone number the public can call. He also stressed they will need help from the public. For example, people who find their catch basin is blocked will be helping out if they can clear it themselves, since the Town won't be able to address them all simultaneously.

Loveridge told Councillor Rob Mezzapelli one of the problem is with so much snow on the ground, it's hard to know exactly where the basins are, although he added keeping them clear is a high priority.

Addressing the sandbags, Loveridge said this would be a good time to secure the sand, even if it means being over supplied.

‘Sand is something we can always use,’ he said, ‘so it’s not a wasted asset if we don’t use it.’

Councillor Richard Paterak said the Town has its own sand pit, but Loveridge wasn’t sure the quality would be suitable. He said he would look into whether it could be sourced internally, but he also stressed the need for getting it soon, rather than having to catch up later.

Brian Baird, parks manager and landscape architect for the Town, told Mezzapelli trees that lost major limbs or had large wounds could be in danger of diseases.

He told Councillor Patti Foley there’s no exact word on how many of the Town’s trees were lost, but he guessed at between 100 and 150.

Council also accepted a report from Caledon Fire and Emergency Services that there be no change to the program for issuing permits for open-air burning when it comes to dealing with debris. They are not allowed in settlement areas, because homes are close together and there could be hazards, including health issues from the resulting smoke.

Councillor Doug Beffort pointed out there are some people in settlement areas living on large lots. He wondered if there could be some program set up as a trial. Fire Chief David Forfar was reluctant to go that route, citing people who might be impacted by smoke. ‘It might open a real can of worms,’ he warned.

DeBoer pointed out this is another factor that re-enforces the need for urban residents to have a simple way of dealing with their debris.

Council also approved a \$200 rebate for low-income seniors and low-income people with disabilities to help with clean-up and the re-establishment of electricity on private property related to the exterior of homes.