

Town looking to permit recreational burning, with conditions

By Bill Rea

There seems to be lots of curiosity, but not much opposition to the Town's plans to change the rules on open-air burning.

The Town recently held a pair of public meetings (one in Bolton and the other in Inglewood).

Chief Fire Prevention Officer Dave Pelayo said one of the issues being addressed deals with recreational burn permits, and he added the effort will be based on what's thought to be reasonable. The plan is to leave a lot of it up to individuals, as long as it's done responsibly.

"We're not hear to police," he said, adding they want Caledon residents to be able to enjoy their properties.

He added the amended bylaw will go to Town council for approval.

Pelayo said that Ontario Fire Code does not permit open-air burning unless it's "approved," or if it's being used for cooking. He added the Town passed a bylaw "approving" open-air burning in 1996. The bylaw was amended in 2006 to give the Town's fire department the ability to further regulate, manage and develop a formal permit process.

The current bylaw allows people living outside settlement areas to burn on their properties, if they have valid permits.

Pelayo said residents in settlement areas have been approaching their councillors with requests to be able to seek burn permits.

The Town consulted the rules in other area municipalities. Pelayo said they allow open-air burning, but cities like Brampton, Mississauga and Vaughan are more restrictive. When it comes to recreational burning, it's currently allowed in most places surrounding Caledon, but not in Brampton or Caledon itself.

Pelayo said the proposed amendments will create three categories of burn permits.

There would be temporary permits for agricultural properties only. These would be issued to people who hold a valid Ontario Federation of Agriculture number and would only be issued for an active commercial farm. The fire department would have to inspect the burn pile, and it can't be larger than 25 square metres. There will also have to be adequate means of putting out the fire on hand.

Open-air permits would be allowed on properties of one acre or more, which Pelayo said is a big change from what's in place now. The fire size would be limited to one cubic metre and must be supervised at all times. There would have to adequate means of putting out the fire, and it would have to be out by 5 p.m. in fall or winter, and 8 p.m. in spring or summer. Only yard waste would be allowed to be burned, but not grass clippings. Pelayo explained grass clippings make a lot of smoke that could bother neighbours. A valid permit would be needed for \$20, and it could be renewed every year.

Recreational permits would be allowed town-wide. The fires would have to be contained inside a non-combustible appliance with a spark screen. It would have to be at least three metres from property lines, structures, decks and fences. The appliances would have to be placed on a non-combustible surface to avoid heating grass, and there must be means of putting the fire out at hand. Pelayo also said the appliance must be no larger than one cubic metre, and must be supervised at all times, and only clean, dry, seasonal wood can be burned, because that creates little smoke.

For recreational permits, Pelayo said the Town is not looking at imposing time limits, since some people would want to start them around 10 p.m., and it would be up to them how long they should burn. He did say the fire would have to be put out before the people retire for the night.

"You don't need a permit to cook," he said, although a screen would have to be in place once the cooking is done.

People wanting to do open-air burning to take care of debris and recreational burning would need two permits, for \$20 each.

Pelayo told one man at the Bolton session the time restrictions on open-air fires are aimed simply at making sure they don't spread. Some people were concerned recreational burning could be an imposition on neighbours.

"This is what we need to hear," Pelayo said. "You're never going to make both sides happy."

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli, himself a firefighter, said some of the problem with bothering neighbours might involve burning the wrong kind of wood.

"Smoke is smoke," one man replied.

A woman added some people create more smoke when they barbecue than with a fire.

Several people at the meeting didn't see a problem with a recreational fire, as long as it's contained.

"It's a contained, small event, once in a while," one man observed.

Pelayo said there will be a public education component if the proposal goes through. He added if certain people present constant problems, the Town will have the authority to revoke their permits. There will be a minimum fine of \$300 for failure to comply with the regulations, and he added if fire trucks are dispatched to the property, the property owner could be billed for the expense.

Deputy Fire Chief Mark Wallace said if a fire is a nuisance to neighbours, the department will act. There were also questions about air quality. Pelayo said the fire department is always in contact with Environment Canada and Forestry Canada. If there are instructions to ban burning, the Town does that.