

To: Community and Operations Services Committee

From: Tracy Adams, Chief Administrative Officer,  
Office of the C.A.O.

Report Number: CO-23-46

Date of Report: September 13, 2023

Date of Meeting: September 18, 2023

Subject: Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program Potential Expansion

Ward: All Wards

File: 03-05

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## **1.0 Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to respond to City Council direction CO-23-40 regarding Boulevard Grass Cutting Program, dated June 26, 2023:

“That the following motion concerning the Boulevard Grass Cutting Program be referred to staff for a report:

Whereas the current boulevard grass cutting program for Oshawa seniors and those with disabilities is limited to side yards only; and,

Whereas there are many residents of Oshawa who meet the current eligibility criteria but whose properties are adjacent to city boulevards but not adjacent to side yards; and,

Whereas they would benefit from an expansion of the current program.

Be it resolved:

1. That the current limitation of the Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program to only side yards be removed and that all properties who meet the current eligibility criteria be offered the service; and,
2. That staff investigate an extension of the program to allow for grass cutting to occur on the entire property of those eligible for the boulevard grass cutting program and report back to committee and Council as soon as possible following the summer break; and,

3. That staff advertise the change in policy in both the media and on the city webpages.”

## **2.0 Recommendation**

It is recommended that the Community and Operations Services Committee select an option as detailed in Section 5.5 of Report CO-23-46 concerning “Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program Potential Expansion”, dated September 13, 2023.

## **3.0 Executive Summary**

Not applicable.

## **4.0 Input From Other Sources**

- Finance Services
- Legal Services
- Oshawa Senior Community Centres Support Services
- Durham Municipal Insurance Pool
- Municipalities: Mississauga, St. Catharines, Waterloo

## **5.0 Analysis**

### **5.1 Background**

The City currently has a Council approved [Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Assistance Program](#) (“Program”) to assist eligible seniors and persons with disabilities with the mowing of side boulevards adjacent to city streets. Annual registration is required. The program does not apply to those residents who are adjacent to a Regional boulevard and does not include the front boulevard.

The Program begins the first or second week of May and ends by October 15. These locations are incorporated into the City’s grass cutting program for parks and is undertaken through the use of contracted services. Side boulevards are cut up to 13 times a year (normally, once every two weeks); however, grass cutting is weather dependent and tends to be more frequent during spring and fall than during a mid-summer dry spell. Due to the nature of the program, the City cannot guarantee a regular cutting schedule. Delays due to wet conditions and contractor staffing issues are often experienced.

Currently there are approximately 70 eligible property owners registered for the Program representing approximately 1.6 ha of additional grass maintenance activities. The Program currently costs approximately \$54,000 in contracted services plus an additional \$11,000 or more in staff administration costs associated with registration, contract administration and the management of complaint calls.

### **5.2 Potential Program Expansion**

A potential expansion of the Program will significantly increase the number of eligible properties resulting in an increase to the annual Parks Operating Budget. In order to

estimate the potential impact, staff used the number of residents that are currently registered for the City's Snow Clearing Assistance Program (S.C.A.P.), which is almost 2,800 eligible participants, as they would be potential participants.

Based on the number of potential participants, staff have estimated that an additional 65 ha would be added to the City's grass cutting contract, which includes the front, side and back yards for eligible residents. There would be a minimum of 13 cuts from April to October, in accordance with the Council approved Quality Standard for the Program. Staff estimate that the cost to expand the Program to include private properties for eligible individuals could range between \$310,000 to \$530,000 per year. The estimate includes administration costs associated with contract management, registration and complaint response resulting from the expanded service.

Along with the financial implications, there are a number of challenges that need to be considered if the Program expands to include access and mowing on private property:

- The City's standards and frequency for cutting does not match the expectation of residents with respect to lawn care. Residents expect a higher level of service than what the City provides resulting in complaints and program dissatisfaction. The City cannot guarantee a regular mowing schedule or accommodate special requests for additional service. Additionally, the current labour market is difficult to find and maintain existing grass contractors. This unpredictability could have an impact on service and result in service delays or increases to contract costs.
- Customer satisfaction is subject to the performance of contractors and service levels, which are difficult to control given the nature of the business, operational constraints and workforce shortages currently being experienced.
- The City's contractor(s) would need access to backyards through fence gate or garage. Grass cutting contractors or City staff would need to ensure gates are properly closed and locked as there could be issues with animals such as cats and dogs. Ideally animals should be inside the residence, gates unlocked, lawn debris and personal items picked up prior to the cutting. Unfortunately, the City does not have the resources to provide advanced notification or schedule arrival dates and times.
- Accessing backyards increases risk of property damage or injury (such as dog bites, trip and falls, etc.). The City would be responsible for repairing any damage that may occur. The difficulty would be proving the condition before and/or after the cutting. Comprehensive documentation of the property and infrastructure, including an inspection would be required in the event that there is damage to property. Residents participating in the Program would need to sign a waiver to help mitigate risk to the City.
- Smaller equipment would be required to complete the work for trimming around pools, patios, sheds, gardens, lawn furniture and other personal items/debris, which require additional resources.

### 5.3 Municipal Comparators

A review of municipal comparators has found that very few municipalities offer grass cutting programs to property owners and none administer grass cutting programs on private property. Only one municipality offered a grass cutting assistance program which was limited to maintaining boulevards within the right of way.

Of the 21 municipalities surveyed, only Mississauga, St. Catharines and Waterloo offered some sort of grass cutting assistance. These programs vary with respect to program implementation and funding, some of which apply an equity lens as part of the eligibility criteria. The following provides an overview of their programs:

- **City of Mississauga** – The City of Mississauga provides financial assistance through their “[Outdoor Maintenance Subsidy Program](#)” low-income seniors (65+) or low-income persons with disabilities can apply to receive financial assistance to cover the cost of maintaining the outside of their property including yard maintenance activities such as grass cutting and snow removal. The maximum subsidy amount provided to qualified applicants is \$350. This program is funded by the City and requires administrative resources to review applications and supporting documentation to confirm eligibility and verification of proof of service. The process of confirming eligibility and reconciliation, prior to processing payment, is lengthy and poses additional challenges when residents use students or individuals to maintain their lawn and do not have the documentation (i.e. invoices) to confirm the service.
- **City of St. Catharines** - Offers boulevard grass cutting service through their operations division within the right-of-way. The grass cutting program applies to boulevards fronting and abutting the primary residence of qualified seniors and persons with a disability. Eligible residents register annually and is geared towards boulevards that might be difficult to cut (e.g. on a slope/hill). The service does not include any grass beyond the limit of the City right of way. Service frequency is at the discretion of the City and will generally begin in May and conclude in September. Challenges exist with determining property lines and managing expectations with a mowing frequency that is not aligned with the mowing of the rest of the lawn.
- **City of Waterloo** – The City of Waterloo’s Senior Services Division is responsible for providing a number of home support services to assist vulnerable older adults including home maintenance activities such as grass cutting, snow shoveling and homemaking tasks such as laundry and cleaning. These tend to be fee for service programs where clients pay an hourly rate to a brokered worker that matches the client’s needs.

All clients who use this service must meet certain eligibility criteria and require a home assessment by one of the City’s Care Facilitators prior to service initiation (to ensure the environment is safe for a worker to attend). The City supports these programs with some additional funding, however, the majority of funding is provided

by the [Ontario Health, through the Ministry of Health](#) through a long standing funding agreement with the City.

Senior Services staff act as “match makers” for their clients and are responsible for intake assessment and screening of workers who are then matched with eligible clients. Brokered workers, which are often students or individuals, operate independently from the City. The City establishes the hourly rate for services that brokered workers can charge the clients (from \$22/hour to \$27/hour) which is paid directly by the client to the worker. Arrangements are made between the client and brokered worker not with the City.

There are a number of other agencies across the province who operate similar programs funded through the Province. Community Care Durham, a charitable organization, operates in Durham Region overseeing many of the Home and Community Support Services programs. Programs are supported through donations and by the Ministry of Health. Community Care Durham, prior to COVID, administered such a program; however, during COVID the program was cancelled due to risk instead referring clients to municipal programs or local yard maintenance service providers.

#### **5.4 Other Support Programs**

The Province of Ontario has a grant program to help eligible low income seniors with their property taxes through the [Senior Homeowner's Property Tax Grant](#). Eligible residents could get up to \$500/year. The City of Oshawa offers an annual tax rebate program for low income seniors and low income persons with disabilities who own and occupy their own home. Eligible individuals receiving Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) Program or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) can apply to the “[Relief for Low-Income Seniors and Homeowners with a Disability Program](#)”. This program reduces the tax levy by \$535. Over the last three years, just over 300 property owners received a reduction in their tax levy. Most municipalities have discontinued their tax rebate program and directed residents to the Provincial grant program.

#### **5.5 Options and Applicable Motions**

Below are three options for the Community and Operations Services Committee's consideration.

##### **5.5.1 Option 1: Continue with the existing Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program (status quo)**

In the event that the Community and Operations Services Committee prefers to continue with the existing Program (status quo), the Committee may wish to pass the following motion:

That the Community and Operations Services Committee recommend to City Council:

“That pursuant to Report CO-23-46 concerning Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program Potential Expansion, dated September 13, 2023, the City continue with the existing Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program.”

### **5.5.2 Option 2: Investigate the implementation of a subsidy program**

This option involves the investigation of a potential subsidy program similar to the City of Mississauga. The program could be administered similar to Oshawa’s existing “Relief for Low-Income Seniors and Homeowners with a Disability” Program, which is open to homeowners who are low-income seniors or persons with a disability. Eligible individuals can apply to receive a reduction in their property taxes. Currently there are approximately 500 eligible homeowners receiving a reduction in their taxes as part of the City’s program. Assuming those same 500 homeowners would register for a grass cutting subsidy the program would cost approximately \$175,000. Like Mississauga, this program would focus on eligible individuals receiving Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) Program or the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Homeowners would be reimbursed the following year upon confirmation of eligibility and submission of documentation to prove service.

This option requires eligible residents to submit appropriate documentation in order to confirm eligibility and proof of service. Although the City would not be responsible for cutting the grass, there would be significant staff resources needed to administer the program including responding to inquiries, reviewing documentation to confirm eligibility and proof of service and processing payments. Additionally, some residents who may not qualify as low-income may want to continue with the current Program. Further review is required to thoroughly assess the feasibility of such a program.

In the event that the Community and Operations Services Committee would like to advance this option, the Committee may wish to pass the following motion:

That the Community and Operations Services Committee recommend to City Council:

“That pursuant to Report CO-23-46 concerning Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program Potential Expansion, dated September 13, 2023, be referred to Corporate and Finance Services Committee to assess the feasibility of implementing a subsidy program and report back through the Corporate and Finance Services Committee on the findings.”

### **5.5.3 Option 3: Expand the grass cutting program to include the entire property and extend the program to all eligible property owners based on current eligibility requirements.**

This option will require staff and/or contractors to access private property and assume the responsibilities and risks as detailed in section 5.2. The expansion would result in an increase to the annual Parks Operating budget of approximately \$310,000 to \$530,000.

In the event that the Community and Operations Services Committee would like to advance this option, the Committee may wish to pass the following motion:

That the Community and Operations Services Committee recommend to City Council:

“That pursuant to Report CO-23-46, concerning Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program Potential Expansion, dated September 13, 2023, a potential increase of \$530,000 to fund the expansion of the City’s current Side Boulevard Grass Cutting Program to include the entire property and extend availability of the program to all eligible property owners based on current eligibility requirements be included for consideration in the 2024 Parks Operating Budget.”

## **6.0 Financial Implications**

Changes to the existing Program will require additional funding. Ongoing annual funding will be needed and subject to increases based on tendering process, administration and interest in the Program. Depending on the preferred option, no additional promotion of the Program would be recommended. Communications would rely on existing promotional activities on the City’s website and upon request through Service Oshawa. If Option 3 is the selected option, clear communication is essential in establishing the level of service and the terms under which the Program would be delivered including the frequency of service.

There are no financial implications should Option 1 be selected. Should Option 2 be selected the approximate cost would be approximately \$175,000. Should Option 3 be selected the approximate cost would be \$310,000 to \$530,000 and would be considered as part of the 2024 Parks Operating Budget.

## **7.0 Relationship to the Oshawa Strategic Plan**

The recommendations in this report responds to the Oshawa Strategic Plan Goals of Accountable Leadership and Economic Prosperity and Financial Stewardship.



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