

Aurora Heights' school travel plan hits snag over public consultation

By Brock Weir

The morning walk to school was set to get a little easier ? and a little safer ? for the Aurora Heights Public School community, but a lack of public consultation put the plan for a new three-way stop sign on the backburner.

Councillors approved a three-way stop for the intersection of Tecumseh Drive and the north side of Kitimat Crescent ahead at the Committee level ahead of last week's Council meeting.

According to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, the proposal was part of the Town's Safe Routes To School program, designed to encourage ?the physical activity of youth, enhance environmental sustainability by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and to alleviate traffic concerns in school areas.?

The plan was brought forward by Aurora Heights and had the greenlight from the York Region District School Board, York Region Community Health and Services, and the Town, but one demographic was left out of the loop, said neighbourhood resident James Hoyes, who delegated to Council last Tuesday to speak against the recommendation.

?I am not opposed to traffic calming, I am not opposed to slowing down traffic, I just see some issues with this intersection,? said Mr. Hoyes.

?Nobody I have talked to in the neighbourhood knew about it. When there are six or seven buses in there, it is a nightmare to try and get out because the buses have to turn wide to get in and out and you find a bottleneck in there already. A lot of parents have chosen to drop off either in front of the school or they park at Kitimat.

?I see what the traffic is like and my concerns are this: it looks like [there will be] curb cutaways because you have to have a place to put pedestrians to walk across a marked intersection, but there are no sidewalks to get to that. Everybody who walks their kids to school will park on my street, which will be fine, [but] they walk down the middle of the street because there are no sidewalks. To funnel them into there is going to be tough.

?Look at the options and see if there is a better option. I just see this as a bigger bottleneck than it potentially would be.?

With that, Councillors sent Mr. Simanovskis back to the drawing board to do just that: determine the other options but, as of last week's Council meeting, he was at somewhat of a loss as to what those other options might be.

?The Safe Routes to School program was a program staff brought forward in 2014 to address school zones and student safety,? he said. ?We found our typical traffic warrant policy was focused on managing vehicles, not managing people. The process we followed is specific to our schools and the Safe Routes program, which engages the school board as well as principals, students and parents who are focused on pedestrian safety.

?This recommendation is not so much staff's recommendation, but a recommendation from that working group that was formed to address safety issues. We are essentially supporting that request through this policy, specifically through Safe Routes to School.?

Councillors, however, generally wanted a re-think. Although they had some reservations about ?elongating? the process, they largely agreed public consultation was missing.

?Based on the resident coming forward, a couple of things were a bit alarming,? said Councillor John Abel. ?I would like to refer this back for engagement with the residents and bring it back to Council.?

Councillor Paul Pirri, on the other hand, wasn't convinced.

?If we send this back to the community, it will be missing the perspective of the students at the school and it is very important we keep their safety paramount and we keep it from their point of view,? he said. ?There are a lot of people, in my opinion, who would oppose an extra stop sign because they don't like the idea of an extra stop sign, but I do think it is probably a good idea for the students.?