

Cousins Drive underpass prioritized by Council in Metrolinx battle

A pedestrian crossing where Cousins Drive meets the Barrie GO Train corridor could get some extra consideration from Council in the coming years.

Last week, sitting at the Committee level, Council agreed to prioritize an above- or below-grade crossing for Cousins at the GO Tracks after Metrolinx firmly closed the door on a more traditional crossing at track level.

The report before Council last Tuesday was the result of a 2020 Motion approved by Council seeking information on potential grade-separated crossings in Aurora as a result of Metrolinx' ongoing plans to expand the rail corridor for all-day two-way GO train service.

Municipal staff identified eight potential pedestrian crossings along the corridor with estimated costs for overpasses and underpasses where applicable.

As Metrolinx won't shoulder the cost of these grade-separated crossings, an overpass could cost the Town \$5 million while an underpass, due to the cost of tunnelling under the tracks, could clock in just below \$9 million.

The Trails Master Plan identifies a number of crossings along the Barrie GO trail corridor, categorizing them at grade, overpasses or underpasses, said Sarah Tienkamp, Manager of Parks and Fleet for the Town of Aurora, and Traffic Analyst Michael Bat, in their report to Council. However, Metrolinx states in a letter to the Mayor dated June 10, 2020, that they would only entertain the possibility of formal grade-separated crossings, which would mean overpasses or underpasses.

Parks staff have prioritized the eight potential locations identifying associated benefits and challenges for discussion purposes and to illustrate that it is not only construction and engineering costs that is required for each crossing; in some cases, land acquisition and easements are necessary.

Due to trespassing being identified as an ongoing issue, the tracks between the GO Station and Engelhard Drive, which includes any potential crossing with Cousins, is protected by a chain-link fence. But despite the costs, Council agreed to prioritize this particular crossing at least for discussion in the 2022 Capital Budget from the list of eight options.

The cost of one, let alone eight, however, was the issue uppermost in the minds of lawmakers last week.

I don't see, personally, a reason to go forward and have staff do more work and debate this at Budget unless someone is actually willing to support and pay for one of the underpasses, which ranges anywhere from \$3 million, or if they are willing to do all eight, for \$30 million, said Councillor Michael Thompson. We were asked to support [the study] and we have. Metrolinx has made it clear where their position is and the only option if the Town is to proceed is to build under or build over.

For myself, I am not in favour of spending \$3 - \$8 million per underpass. I am happy to receive this report, but I am not supportive of continuing this discussion at budget.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner was more supportive of continuing the discussion, but said it was likely a non-starter due to the price tag.

Of course we want this and we want our residents to know that we want it, it would be such an enhancement to the Town and for the pleasure of our residents, but unless the Town wins a lottery, and I don't know if a Town is allowed to win a lottery, I don't know [where] we would get this money, she said. Even if we did one, whatever one we did, all the people who want all the other crossings are going to be annoyed with us because they want their area. I don't see how we can win this one in any way: with money, with the residents, and it is truly unfortunate.

?If the residents have any ideas of how we can pay for this, then I would be pleased to hear from them.?

Councillor John Gallo, on the other hand, said it was important to put the crossings back on the table. The report up for discussion last week resulted from his motion and he said now was not the time to give up.

?We are bisected by railway tracks and double-tracking them [for all-day 15-minute service] is going to drastically change the way we commute,? said Councillor Gallo. ?The idea behind the Trails Master Plan is to encourage utilitarian non-motorized transportation?without some forethought in terms of how we can get people east and west that is not necessarily too onerous in terms of how far we have to walk, we have virtually destroyed that concept and you can remove it from the Plan because it just won't exist and once all that work is done you can forget about it.

?I realize there are costs involved, but that doesn't mean you give up. This is the first report on this. That doesn't mean you give up. There is a whole slew of things you could probably do. You can take Wellington Street just east of John West Way?as an example of past Councils that didn't want to spend a little bit on money to have an underpass there and now to put one there is extremely expensive. We're in that position now as a Council and we have to determine what our priorities are. We're spending nearly \$60 million on Library Square. It just seems like it is a complete missed opportunity that we should have been putting money aside for this type of thing and we didn't. It is one of the things that in five or ten years will drastically impact the way people move around this Town.?

Similar sentiments were offered by Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said Council shouldn't ?shut the door right away? on this.

?It might not be the best-case scenario as it is presented now, but this is the first round and I support the recommendation as it is being presented.?

Added Mayor Tom Mrakas: ?I don't think anyone is recommending doing all eight, so why not say right now [these are the priorities] ?and then in 2023 when we do the DC (Development Charge) Bylaw we can look at adding this so that way the development community can [start paying for these]. If we are looking at it, we should focus on the priority [crossings].?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter