

Cost of Rainbow Crosswalk sparks cross words at Council

Aurora's upcoming Rainbow Crosswalk was approved by Council on a vote of 5 ? 2 last week, but the vote would have been unanimous had Councillors known an anonymous donor had stepped up to contribute \$10,000 towards the \$12,600 project, according to Councillor John Gallo.

This was the view expressed by Councillor Gallo at the end of last week's Council meeting ? and later online ? after Mayor Tom Mrakas revealed the anonymous donation nearly an hour after the final vote was taken to move ahead with the Rainbow Crosswalk.

In the discussions leading up to the vote, the \$12,600 price tag was a bone of contention to both Councillor Gallo and Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who both said they were supportive of the project in principle but questioned approving the costs outside the budget cycle and at a time when post-COVID-19 recovery was uncertain.

?Generally speaking, I am in support of these types of endeavours and there's great value to the community, there's no question about that,? said Councillor Gallo near the start of the debate. ?To me, I don't really see the urgency of this. I hope I am consistent in terms of spending money.

?I think the idea is great, but the timing sucks ? to no fault of anyone. It is just not something I am willing to spend money on right now. I am more than happy to push it to Budget, have a discussion, deal with it next year, but I won't be supporting it today. No matter how noble the cause is, spending taxpayer money today just doesn't sit well with me ? particularly mid-budget. I don't disagree that this is an important thing and I agree with all the positive things this could generate [but] for me it is a financial issue.?

Councillor Gaertner, who has often participated in the York Region Pride Parade, said she thought it was a ?great idea? but questioned both the cost and location.

?I am not worried about offending the community,? she said. ?Those who know me know that I have been very sincere in my support for Pride [and] I believe I have been a very good, supportive friend to some of those in the community [but] I just can't vote for this. I appreciate what you're trying to do with this and I am hoping we can maybe take another idea and maybe do flags. Maybe we can do something in the interim and when we do [the intersection] hopefully our finances will be better and it will make a statement then ? and we can make a statement in support in other ways right now.?

Although she ultimately voted in favour of the project ?on principle?, similar concerns were also offered by Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

?I do want to move forward with this initiative; I think it is absolutely fantastic ? it's the fact we're never really presented with a cost analysis on this motion to begin with and we're just learning about these costs right now,? she said, adding she had particular questions about the financial impacts should the sidewalk need to be replaced or expanded following the intersection's reconstruction.

?I just want to see some numbers back from staff in order to reflect that concern,? she said.

Following the vote, Mayor Mrakas announced the donation.

?I referenced 'doing the right thing' in my motion [and that is because] when this initiative was?when I brought it forward, people recognized how important this initiative is and they immediately stepped up,? he said. ?We have secured a donation of \$10,000. I didn't want to influence the vote because right is right. So, I am glad that this initiative is going forward.?

But this revelation sparked dismay from Councillors Gallo and Gaertner with the former stating that ?tidbit of information would have been valuable and I probably would have changed my vote had I known that was the case.?

Added Councillor Gaertner ?If we are trying to decide what is right, and the financial implication was the most important, it is interesting you didn't discuss it.?

Responded Mayor Mrakas: ?You voted the way you did because that is the way you felt.?

Following the meeting, Councillor Gallo expanded upon his objections on a video posted to social media.

?The proverbial mic dropped right at the end of the meeting in other business where the Mayor had spoken last and had told us that he had a donor that was willing to donate \$10,000 towards this project,? said Councillor Gallo. ?Now, if you take that into full context, knowing full well that Councillor Gaertner and I were not going to be supportive of this because of the finances and he chose to withhold that information during the discussion part of that meeting, knowing full well that had he let us know that there was a donor out there who was willing to give us \$10,000, he would have known that Councillor Gaertner and I would have supported this and we would have had a unanimous vote on an important issue and a Council that would have been strong in supporting this issue and that community.

?He could have chosen to unite Council and let us know that the funding was there and have a unanimous decision and all of us together ? he chose not to and chose to put a wedge between us.?

Mayor Mrakas, however, tells The Auroran that the anonymous donor did not want their donation to ?influence the discussion and they specifically requested? it be handled as it was.

By Brock Weir