

Hikers request parking on Benville Crescent for trail access

Residents are encouraging the Town to reconsider a parking bylaw amendment for Benville Crescent to ensure accessible parking is available at the southern trailhead access point at Evans Park.

As a member of a weekly hiking group in Aurora, Renee McCammon, an Aurora resident since 1995, noted that the bylaw restricts trail access to residents living nearby.

‘We would like to encourage the Town Council to continue to ensure that there is accessible parking at all our playgrounds, parks, trails and trail heads, and that none of these amazing community resources become available to only those of our residents who are fortunate to live near them,’ said McCammon at the General Committee meeting of March 7, 2023.

Patti Scully, resident of Aurora since 1983, said that Evans Park was selected in 2020 for her sister Janice Scully's memorial tree.

Her sister was a passionate educator, hiker, and dear friend to many, she said, and the decision to choose Evans Park to commemorate her legacy came just before the parking bylaw limited trailhead access.

‘The decision to choose Evans Park was based on proximity to the trailhead, and accessibility for all from seniors to young children. But shortly after the tree was planted, temporary no parking signs and a permanent sign directing trail users to park 3.2 kilometers away at Sheppard's Bush were erected on both sides of the street,’ Scully said.

In effect, Evans Park became accessible only to the residents of Benville Crescent or those capable of making the trek, said McCammon.

A safety study was conducted in early 2021 and determined that there was adequate room on the roadway and that no parking restrictions were needed, added McCammon.

‘[Now-former] Councillor Sandra Humfries instructed the removal of all of the no parking signs and we don't understand what has changed since then,’ she said.

McCammon and Scully requested that Council consider several factors before passing the parking bylaw.

Only seven out of 41 households on Benville Crescent want no parking on both sides of Benville Crescent around Evans Park, Scully contended, adding that it seemed like a small number of people in favor of the bylaw in comparison to the number of Aurora residents who may want to visit the park from the southern trailhead access point.

Scully encouraged lawmakers to receive feedback from other rural residents regarding the matter and asked whether a counter petition from concerned hikers would be considered before decisions are made.

Scully also noted that if the trail system was designed to be accessible in various neighborhoods in Aurora, the parking bylaw works contrary to the vision of the trail system.

Having cars parked on both sides of the street does have an impact on residents, McCammon said, speaking from her own experience living nearby a Case Woodlot access point near Tamarac Trail.

‘Everyday people park their cars in front of our house and that of our neighbors on both sides of the street. At such times we are down to one lane and we may need to wait for another car to drive down the street. We also have to be extra careful when backing out of our driveway. And on snowy days, the plows do have to navigate around the curve and the cars,’ she said.

?But despite all of this, we also know that the Case Woodlot like Evans Park and the entire trail system is an amazing natural community resource for all to experience and enjoy.?

McCammon added that families with little children will have to park further away from the trail and walk where there [are] no sidewalks to access the park, making it a potential danger hazard as well.

As an alternative to the bylaw, Scully hoped that lawmakers would consider adding parking in front of the park, particularly on the east side of Benville Crescent, opposite to the park.

In response to a question from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland about the amount of activity at the park, McCammon said that the Case Woodlot was much busier during the pandemic lockdowns when residents sought ways to stay active outdoors.

Considering the amount of residents that often visit and potential sightline issues or emergency vehicles that need to pass, Councillor Gilliland asked if it would be a sufficient amount of space for parking if only the east side was opened.

McCammon replied that, from what she's seen, she thinks it would be sufficient.

?We feel strongly about Evans Park. But we are hikers and we start all through the neighborhood every week in different places,? she said. ?I just think that we have to have the difference between what's good for the individual residents and what's available for the whole Town.?

Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson thanked the delegates for attending and said they will try to find the balance between the needs of the residents living on Benville Crescent and those that utilize both the parks and trails.

Director of Community Services Robin McDougall said she does not have any concerns regarding the proposal.

Ensuring the road has room for snow plows and emergency vehicles to pass is one priority, she said, adding that the safety of residents who park further down the road and walk to the park is another priority.

Currently, residents living nearby have not raised concerns about visitors parking in front of residential homes, McDougall said.

?I think ultimately, if you're there for a park, recreationally, I would anticipate that walking an extra 20 [or] 50 feet is not extensive. And just in my opinion, I do think that the access will still continue. It's just where will the cars go? I think ultimately they will find a way if they really want to go to that site,? she said.

Director of Planning Marco Ramunno said the survey was completed by a traffic analyst around January of 2022. Only 12 responses were received out of 41 homes on Benville Crescent, making a response rate of 29 per cent.

Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese said a ?more strident? approach to the survey would be important for understanding more of the community's thoughts on the bylaw.

?I'm just wondering about what the other 71 per cent of the people are going to say if they suddenly are without parking,? he said. ?Are you going to have other problems with them coming forward now that they've been restricted from using on-street parking for visitors? So, I don't know who has that information, but I think a more strident approach to the survey would be more important for us so that we have a pretty good idea of what the actual community thinks about that.?

Councillor Gilliland said that the original information received by Council pertained to the disturbance and peace of the neighborhood rather than traffic and engineering concerns. She asked whether there are any concerns regarding sightlines that would merit traffic concern limiting parking to one side only.

Ramunno replied that he doesn't believe it was an issue and the only comment was that the majority of respondents voted for parking restrictions on both sides of the street, however, that the Operations and Public Works division also agrees that parking on both sides could pose snow removal challenges during winter months.

Councillor Gilliland said that she would not be in support of no parking on both sides of the street, given the information received, noting that the survey did not seem to capture the general consensus of the entire street.

Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo agreed that there are ?a few holes in the project.?

He suggested referring to the Active Transportation and Traffic Safety Advisory Committee to provide recommendations.

Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she agreed that it would be helpful to refer to the committee.

?We have to think about what the community wants, the neighborhood wants, but also what's good for the community as a trailhead, so I think it's good that it goes to the committee,? she said.

Al Downey, Director of Operations, confirmed that park visitors are allowed to park anywhere else except where the signs are posted.

Council voted in favor of a motion to refer the request for a Parking By-law Amendment on Benville Crescent to the Active Transportation and Traffic Safety Advisory Committee for review and comment.

By Elisa Nguyen