

Rick Hansen P.S. students continue to lead way walking to school ? but a little safer now



By Brock Weir

The Rick Hansen Public School community has stressed the importance of staying active and walking to school, but things are due to become just a little bit safer for students leading the way this week.

Council is set to approve a number of measures this week that will help students, parents, and teachers travelling to and from school during the busy morning and afternoon hours. After receiving tentative approval at last Tuesday's General Committee meeting, the northeast Aurora neighbourhood will soon see a three way stop sign installed at the intersection of Hartwell Way and Billbrough Street, new pedestrian crossing pavement markers throughout the roundabout at Hartwell and Mavrinac Boulevard, increased signage for school areas, all in addition to a recently installed three-way crossing at Mavrinac and Cosford Street.

“Rick Hansen Public School has been a leader in adopting the Walking Wednesdays program where it saw remarkable results in reducing the vehicular traffic in the school vicinity and increasing the number of students, parents and school staff walking to school,” noted Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, in his report to Committee. “During the Walking Wednesdays program, a number of gaps and areas of safety concerns were identified that are needed to be addressed to provide a complete safe network to walk to school. Therefore, the school, in coordination with the Town, York Region [District] School Board and York Region Community and Health Services initiated the need for a school travel planning program to provide students and parents safe routes to school.”

These recommendations received the hearty endorsement from the school last week through Principal Steve Gardiner who spoke at last week's meeting, highlighting the needs of a growing school community in view of the community growing rapidly around it.

“We're a school that opened our doors in September, 2012, with 375 students at this point and opened in a new community with houses between zero and five years of age,” he said. “One of the things we did when we opened the school was really promote walking to the school.”

One measure taken within the school was forming a Healthy Active Living Committee made up of parents and staff who sought opportunities to further that mandate. They looked at barriers that might impede students, parents and staff walking to school, conducted a wide-ranging survey within the school community, and one of the most significant barriers they had was stop signs, crosswalks, and even foliage on roundabouts that might obscure the views of both walkers and drivers.

The already-installed stop signs at Mavrinac and Cosford have already made a significant difference on the morning commute, Mr.

Gardner added.

“It has been a fantastic difference,” he said. “Even the week before school started and the number of families that talk about it [say it is] wonderful, so it is already making a big difference in terms of speed. This is a list of exactly what we asked for.”

Rick Hansen Public School is the latest Aurora elementary school that has been on the receiving end of a number of changes and studies designed to look at ways to get kids and parents up on their feet, leaving their cars at home, and helping to reduce traffic congestion in school areas around the busy morning drop-off and pick-up times.

“A couple of months ago we went through a similar process with Devins Drive Public School and, at that point, Councillor Abel and I had done some surreptitious watching of traffic to the school and we noticed that most of the violators of things like stop signs were parents dropping their kids off at school,” said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, noting the school was working to make sure everyone obeyed traffic laws and questioning whether that was the case at Rick Hansen as well.

While Council signed off on the recommendations last week, one bone of contention were those stop signs at Mavrinac and Cosford. Having been installed before the start of the school system, and before Council had the opportunity to give the signs the high sign, Councillor Michael Thompson questioned how that came to be. Mr. Simanovskis said a memo responding to the situation would be on a future Council agenda.