

Trails need to accommodate more users: candidates agree

By Brock Weir

In the home stretch of the campaign trail, municipal candidates turned their attention to Aurora's trails system and how they can be best used by the public.

Improving access to existing trails, while making sure current and future trails are in place to allow people to get where they need to go without hitting the road, was a recurring theme in last week's all-candidates meeting hosted by Sport Aurora.

In addressing how current and future recreation facilities could be improved to keep the community active, mayoral candidate Geoff Dawe said one of the things the incoming Council needs to do is investigate paving some trails to make sure they are an active part of the Town's active transportation system.

"The lake to lake trail system might be an opportunity to pave it as a bike trail for transportation to and from the train station," said Mr. Dawe, referring to the Nokiidaa Trail, which stretches through Aurora and Newmarket, moving northward to Lake Simcoe and southward to Lake Ontario.

In candidate Chris Ballard's opinion, Aurora's trail system is an asset but one which "we really let go."

"We have not demanded enough of developers and we ourselves have not been creative enough in completing some of our trails," he said. "I can point to a few places around Town where we should have done more over the last few years. Council should have done more over the last few years but hasn't. We need to really work hard to build out that active transportation network."

Candidate Tom Mrakas, on the other hand, said Aurora's Trails & Active Transportation Committee has been working hard to ensure the Town has "the best trails" around.

"I think the Town has done a phenomenal job in providing those trails to this community and I think if you ask anyone in the community they will say that we have the best trails in all of York Region, if not in the GTA," he said. "I think we have done a great job on that and I find it somewhat puzzling [to hear] our trails are not good because I frequently go through them and every resident does and I think they can say they are the best in all of the GTA."

Candidates, including those vying for six Council places, had a chance to delve into further depth a bit later in the meeting when a member of the public asked the candidates for suggestions on how Aurora can reduce friction and accidents on the trails between cyclists and pedestrians.

In response, Mr. Mrakas said he and Sandra Humfries put forward a motion for a Cycling Master Plan, which would help address those issues.

"Part of that master plan will be to develop bike lanes and make sure they are in collaboration with the people who are using the trails and making sure we do have bike lanes separate from people being able to utilize those trails and utilize them for walking," he said. "We are going down that path, we've already hired the consultant to do the work around the Cycling Master Plan and we're going to develop that connectivity throughout our Town."

Candidate John Abel, on the other hand, offered promoting a cycling race in Aurora to raise not only awareness but sport tourism. For Mr. Ballard, it was a matter of educating both cyclists and walkers on "courtesy."

"As cyclists are hitting the trails, we need to make sure that they understand they are sharing the trail," he said. "As walkers are out there, we need to make sure they understand there are cyclists on the trails as well and are trying to share them. We may have some walking-only trails that need to be dedicated or perhaps some cycling only trails that need to be dedicated, but more on that later."

Mr. Dawe offered a similar view, adding: "I think we need to ensure that people who use the trails follow the rules of the road, separate the walkers, pay attention to what they are doing would go a long way towards alleviating those issues."

Once the Mayoral candidates had their say, Council candidates waded into the fray, with Vicky McGrath noting there are examples in other jurisdictions, including the City of Toronto, on how this can be done, while Anna Kroepelin said there is a significant lack of bike locks throughout the municipality to be truly cycle-friendly.

Matthew Abas encouraged bringing the Province in on the talks to facilitate a potential bike lane along the Hydro corridor while Wendy Gaertner said more needs to be done to ensure trails are ready for pedestrian and cyclists throughout the winter.

"It is an excellent trails system, but we don't plow it in the winter," she said. "It is not paved, it's not accessible at many times of the year, and certainly not in the winter for those who might be in wheelchairs or walkers. I think that is a conversation we need to have with the public because that would cost a lot of money, but it might be a great benefit."

Harold Kim agreed it would be "great" to groom trails in the wintertime for other purposes, including cross-country skiing.

Going a step further and paving trails, however, was a more divisive topic, particularly how that option might impact the "natural"

state of trails.

“Our trails are natural, they’re rolling,” said Mr. Abel. “I think the suggestion we’re looking at is maybe paving the entrance or creating some of the trails for bike use. It is a balance. We have to meet that balance and we have to engage our people, do some research and come up with some options and solutions.”

Added Mr. Dawe: “I have probably talked to as many people who are in favour of paving the trails as leaving them as they are. [What we] need to do is look at a strategic allocation of trails, spine trails, that we pave and turn into active transportation that you use that to provide that different type of active transportation either running perhaps in the winter or using your bicycle. It needs to be defined and it needs to go in with a comprehensive plan as to what trails would you pick, how would you maintain it, and what would the cost be?”

Mr. Mrakas noted that this is something the Trails Committee has already looked at.

“We sat down many times how we’re going to move forward with the trails. As was mentioned, many Aurorans would like to see the trails remain as is, they don’t want to see them paved. Some don’t want to see lighting, some do want to see lighting. These are the conversations that are happening at the Committee level and we are going to continue that through the work of the committee and talk with the residents and make sure what we provide is not only what the residents want, but also fiscally responsible and we need to make sure we’re not digging into everyone’s pockets to pay for something necessarily not everyone likes.”