

Yonge Street parking proposal hits roadblock

By Brock Weir

A pilot project championed by Mayor Geoff Dawe that would have tested out a new on-street parking system for Yonge Street from Wellington in the north to Kennedy Street in the south, hit a significant road block last week.

Councillors, sitting at the Committee Level, voted down the plan, which would have seen this section of Yonge Street reduced to a single lane in each direction with the remaining lane on either side dedicated to on-street parking. However, there might still be light at the end of the tunnel as Council this week voted to send the project to 2017 Budget talks for further consideration.

The intent of the proposal, said Mayor Dawe, is to create 'a people-friendly space' to change the streetscape, but the majority of Council said they had too many questions for it to continue. Their decision to nix the plan is set to come forward to Council for final ratification this week.

'If you look at some of the concepts of people-friendly cities, it is people, transit, bicycles and cars,' said Mayor Dawe, outlining the potential of the plan, which would have provided 'bump outs' onto the sidewalks for area businesses, particularly restaurants and cafes, to have patio areas dotting what is traditionally Aurora's main street. 'The idea is to create an area that is more friendly. [Aurora Public Library CAO Jill Foster] says, 'I don't like walking on Yonge Street because the traffic is too fast' and it is not a comfortable environment.' I have talked to a number of people who say, 'You can park on Yonge Street' and they say, 'I don't feel comfortable parking on Yonge Street because the traffic is simply too fast.

'It seems counterintuitive, but it actually does improve traffic flow because people are not diving in and out [which] a number of merchants I have spoken with up and down Yonge Street identify as a problem. It brings a little more order to that traffic flow and quite frankly, if you look at Yonge Street at almost any time of day, it is one lane because people park there.

'By providing perhaps a more structured area, it creates what I think is a much more friendly streetscape in the area, far more people-friendly, and part of what this Council overall agrees is a challenge that we're trying to deal with right now, which is to work with those businesses to create a more friendly environment.'

While Councillors agreed that is a challenge that needs to be addressed this, they said, was not the right way to do it. Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, said he had ongoing questions about what was hoped to be accomplished in the pilot. Similar programs in municipalities like Barrie and Burlington have approached their plans differently, including tackling liability concerns, leasing out sidewalk space for restaurants, and related issues.

'This has been in front of us for a year-and-a-half and these are the questions I continue to ask: What is the goal? How are we going to do it? How are we going to implement it? What are the details? It seems to be a challenge to get these details on how the program is actually going to be implemented and run. It is crucial to understand the liability and lease agreements.'

Similar questions were raised by Councillor Tom Mrakas who said questions he had been asked previously on the impact such a plan would have on emergency services were still unanswered. He likened the 'bump outs' in the plan to 'chicanes on a main arterial road' and said claims in the staff report that the majority of those attending the open house were in favour of the plan were inaccurate.

Others, such as Councillor John Abel, said they were concerned this plan was moving too fast through the system, while others such as Councillor Harold Kim said they were worried about the ripple effect limiting traffic to one lane would have on surrounding neighbourhoods.

'I love this idea in theory, but I find it a little bit scary, in fact,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'A lot of people have spoken to me and the idea is wonderful, thanks to the Mayor, but we already have a problem on this strip. It is going to cause more of a

problem. We know this is a transit corridor and the Region wants to do these dedicated bus lanes and at some point they are going to get around to doing it. One of the worst things, if we did this for a few months and residents really like it, is [the Region coming to us saying] you can't cut it down because we need that second lane for transit. For me, that takes priority.?

Some members of Council were in favour of the plan, however, with Councillor Jeff Thom citing Markham's main street as an example that works, if Aurora proceeds with caution.

?We keep talking about revitalization and bringing people back to the core,? said Councillor Sandra Humfries. ?We keep saying all this stuff, we have some great ideas, but nothing has been done. I am looking forward to this and we can see it. It might cause chaos, it might not. It might cause some great economic development in our Town and we can just build on it.?