

Aurora mulls Regional partnership for Leslie Street underpasses

By Brock Weir

Aurora could team up with the Region of York on two pedestrian underpasses tunnelling under Leslie Street when the busy road is widened and overhauled in 2015.

Councillors are set to formally approve co-funding the pedestrian underpasses this month. The 50/50 cost sharing deal, if approved, will come with a \$475,000 price tag.

Earmarked for construction beneath Leslie are crossings near St. John's Sideroad and State Farm Way.

The underpasses are a long held vision of members of the Town's Trails and Active Transportation Committee and have been outlined in Aurora's Master Trails Plan. They have been long-time advocates of making these underpasses a reality, allowing pedestrians to cross busy roads without having to contend with traffic. Whether financed by the Town, the Region, or in collaboration between the two, a potential deal was reached last month.

There was initially push back from the region over potential costs of underpasses, but further studies indicated the costs would be less than previously forecast. Savings have been found in a number of key areas, including making best use of culverts which already need to be addressed and slight modifications of existing plans.

The underpass 260 metres north of State Farm Way will use a twin box culvert at a cost of \$400,000 split two ways, and 380 metres north of St. John's Sideroad using a twin tunnel for \$550,000.

"I am very glad we have an agreement on two underpasses," said Councillor Wendy Gaertner at Council this month of the talks which began in 2009. The issues were initially addressed on July 17 but a final decision was put off until August 13.

"I think having two underpasses is a great success and I would like to congratulate the Trails Subcommittee that did so much work on this, staff, Mr. Downey, and others. I would also like to congratulate mayor Morris' Council for initiating and supporting what I think is a very valuable addition to the community."

As Council reserved their final decision until mid-August, some Councillors had a more tempered view of the project, in particular Councillor Michael Thompson who questioned whether this was the right investment in the right place.

He questioned whether or not these underpasses would lead to lands where the Town can actually continue a trail, or whether any further acquisitions would be made to fully realise the trails plan in light of the Province and the Region's planned interchange between Highway 404 and St. John's Sideroad by the end of this decade.

"If we build this underpass in 2015, is this going to be a tunnel to nowhere, or is there actually going to be a trail here? I question putting an underpass there for a trail that may or may not ever materialize, which would dead-end if it can't cross over St. John's and you have to move back.

"I think it is wonderful that the Region is willing to fund it all, but is it really needed in that spot? I don't necessarily want to have an underpass where people come down and there is a sign at the end of the underpass saying please turn around and go back. It's the same thing when you look at the one south that is 260 metres north of State Farm Way. State Farm has indicated they didn't want the trail around their lands. The underpass that is at Wellington and the 404 is never going to happen and the rest of this land, which is employment land, are they going to have the same objections as State Farm did and say they don't want this going through their land as well?

?To be honest with you, I am not in favour of approving this because of the decisions that have already been made with regards to Wellington Street and St. John's with the underpasses and the likelihood of those trails connecting.?

At the end of the day, he added, it might make more sense to re-assess Leslie Street closer to when the Region begins work to see if it can accommodate wider sidewalks and bikeways.

What do you think? Do you think underpasses under Leslie Street are a good idea? Send your thoughts to letters@auroran.com.