

Budget talks continue next week following capital approval

By Brock Weir

Aurora's 2014 Capital Budget is signed and sealed.

Councillors approved the first phase of the 2014 budget at a Special Council meeting on December 17, approving over \$9.5 million in capital projects.

Aurora's Capital Budget will cover such items as repair and replacement of local infrastructure, including roads and parks, underground infrastructure like sewers, municipal vehicles and studies.

Among the items approved are \$3 million to convert Aurora's street lights to LED lighting in a bid to save energy and, in turn, mounting costs. It also includes five new vehicles for the Town's fleet, intersection improvements for Wellington Street and John West Way, an upgraded splash pad for kids using Ada Johnson Park after the current splash pad was feeling the strain of unexpected wear and tear, and studies including the Aurora Promenade and the groundwork for a community improvement plan focusing on Downtown Aurora.

\$150,000 was also formalized for a previously approved accessible playground for Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park, the former Civic Square Park rebranded in 2013.

In a statement following the special Council meeting, Mayor Geoffrey Dawe heralded the approved capital budget as a "fiscally sound" capital budget that will keep roads, parks, and infrastructure in shape, and account for future growth needs.

"I was pleased Council saw the merits, value and prudence of this budget and worked together to provide prompt approval," he said.

During the meeting itself, however, it was the final chance for Mayor Dawe, as well as Councillors to ask any burning questions they had, make final pitches to have items inserted or removed, and generally voice their support or concerns with the budget itself.

Among the items put under the microscope were new exterior automated sliding doors for the Aurora Public Library, proposed reconstruction of Elderberry Trail, the John West Way and Wellington Street Intersection, improvements to local creek beds, relining water mains and parks and playgrounds.

Up first were new doors for the Aurora public library. The approved project will replace the manual doors with automated sliding glass doors. In question after previous budget meetings, they were put back in the final Capital budget following a pitch from Councillor Michael Thompson, who said the current system was suffering "excessive wear and tear."

As Director of Infrastructure, Mr. Simanovskis was in the hot seat for many of the projects scrutinized by Council, including a proposed \$2 million reconstruction of Elderberry Trail, which was ultimately put on the back burner for the time being.

Commuters might also experience a bit of a traffic headache at Wellington Street East and John West Way following the approval of the capital budget.

In a continuation of a project previously outlined in Aurora's 10 year capital plan, replacement crosswalks will be installed at the intersection.

Although they had been worked on in 2013, replacement work will rectify what has created a "hazardous" situation for pedestrians and vehicles with shifting paving stones.

The \$112,000 project will remove the existing paving stones on two sides of the intersection and install a "zebra pattern" crosswalk

in their place.

“This intersection was actually rectified by our staff and the issue was safety concerns with the pavers that were installed due to movement settling and pavers becoming a hazard with traffic,” said Mr. Simanovskis.

The Region has nixed similar pavers going forward, he added, as they become unstable and safety hazards. The new patterned crosswalk will be laid as a “print”, similar to an iron-on to the asphalt which has proven to be more durable over time than paint or spray applications.

Away from the roads, parks dominated a significant portion of last month's discussions, particularly underscoring the perennial argument of needs versus wants. Among the many capital projects proposed for 2014, among those generating the most questions at the final kick at the can were proposals to improve the bowling green at McMahon Park, the replacement of playground equipment at Khamissa Park, and a new splash pad at Ada Johnson Park.

These improvements brought up the perennial question of needs versus wants.

“At some point I would like to analyse not only this, but at a certain point, things become unsustainable and we need to look at this,” said Councillor John Gallo on the improvements to the bowling green. “In a broader sense, we need to analyse if there is a dozen or two dozen people that utilize this, we have to figure out what it is costing everybody else in the Town to want this service to that many people, or how to promote it so [more people] enjoy the facility so the tax dollars are well spent.”

The Councillor had similar concerns over \$75,000 to refurbish baseball diamonds at Lambert Willson Park, but Councillors were more fulsome in their approval for new equipment for Khamissa Park in Southwest Aurora. The \$85,000 project will replace “outdated and unattractive” but still functional playground equipment in the 25-year-old park.

“It has lost its interest to the neighbourhood children, so we are looking at putting in a piece of equipment that is going to hopefully add some interest for the children in the area,” said Mr. Downey. “We had some concerns raised by residents in that area that they would like to see playground equipment installed that has a little bit more value.”

Costs also include replacing the current sand surface with bark mulch which the Town has found more “resilient” and easier to maintain.

With the Capital Budget in the can, the Council will begin tackling Aurora's 2014 Operating Budget, the true indicator of how much your taxes are likely to go up in the New Year next Saturday, January 14 in an all-day session at Town Hall. Members of the public are welcome to participate.