

Council could be limited in decision-making over new sidewalks

Proposed changes to the rules on when and where new sidewalks are installed could remove Council from the decision-making process, at least at the outset.

This month, Council will consider revisions to existing sidewalk policies that would invest municipal staff with the power to authorize new sidewalk construction, while still allowing residents the chance to delegate to Council with their concerns over installation.

Delegating this authority away from Council to staff is not a new proposal and was last floated in September 2020. At the time, Council requested more information on this delegated authority.

This further report hit the Council table at last week's General Committee and re-affirmed staff's recommendation to go down this route.

"Sidewalks represent a critical component of the transportation network necessary to support a safe, accessible and walkable municipality," said Traffic Analyst Michael Bat in his report. "The Town's sidewalk policy enables the Town to install sidewalks where they are not present in order to remove barriers to accessibility, complete gaps in the Town's active transportation network, and help all residents and visitors connect to transit, schools and other neighbourhood amenities.

"The major change [to the policy] is to assign the Director responsible for engineering services the authority to approve the installation of sidewalks on local roads where they are missing, on one or both sides of the right-of-way as part of road reconstruction projects in accordance with Town design standards.

"Property owners will continue to have the option of delegating to Council should they have a concern with the installation of a new sidewalk, but Council approval is no longer proposed to be part of this formal policy. However, Council can still provide direction to staff with regards to the installation and any modifications to the Town's design standards for sidewalks."

The revised and renewed proposal was once again met with mixed reviews by lawmakers.

Although the report notes that East Gwillimbury is the only municipality staff surveyed that requires Council approval for new sidewalks, some Council members say that adopting this policy would hinder residents coming to their representatives with their concerns.

"In the eight or nine years I have been on Council, yes, we have had some discussions regarding sidewalks, I think they have been fruitful discussions [and] I think it should remain a Council decision and I don't see a strong rationale to give delegated authority to this," said Councillor John Gallo. "It is one more avenue that we're pushing the public away, in my opinion."

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who says communication with residents is very important.

"We seem to have done a pretty bad job with communications in at least the Kitimat instance" she said, referencing prolonged discussions over new sidewalks on the street to improve pedestrian safety surrounding Aurora Heights Public School. "The Kitimat issue lasted for a long time and was very Council time intensive, and I don't know that we reached a resolution that the residents were happy with, but I do think sidewalks are very important and I would like to stay in touch with that issue."

Similarly, Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she too wanted the public to have their say.

"Delegated authority does streamline things, but I do want the public to have the opportunity to petition," she said. "If there is an issue for whatever reason, it might not work everywhere. If it merits, I want to give them the opportunity. I want to dig into this

further but, for now, I am just going to hold off in agreeing with this until we revisit this.?

Other Council members did not share these concerns.

Councillor Harold Kim, for instance, said he understood those of his colleagues but, in his view ?safety and security trumps all things? and sidewalks fall under this banner.

?In areas of public safety, sometimes public consultation is not done,? he said. ?I don't think the government consulted with the public with regards to seat belts. In many rural areas that are becoming suburban areas where roads and homes are built, or homes are already there and roads are being reconstructed and paved, it is not consulted whether you want lights or not for safety purposes in these areas.

?I am in support of delegated authority on this matter and I do empathize with those that it may negatively impact on a day-to-day basis, but we do try to remediate that so that it is as few as possible. Overall, I would have to say this is an overall positive for the community and residents.?

In speaking in favour of the recommendations, Mayor Tom Mrakas emphasized the provision that will still allow members of the public to make delegations to Council on these issues.

?We go and we speak to staff about [what we hear from residents] and we look at bringing resolutions or solutions to those issues that are being brought to our attention,? he said. ?That is always there regardless of if there is delegated authority. At the end of the day, this is about providing efficiency. Our residents will continue and always continue no matter whether we pass this or not? They can speak to each and every one of us. It is dependent upon not on the policy but on each and every one of us sitting at this table about what our thoughts are about how open we are and how we allow them to come in and speak to us.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter