

Council passes on costly Leslie and St. John's trail underpass

By Brock Weir

Will it turn out to be a missed opportunity for the thousands of new residents expected to move into Aurora's 2C development over the next few years, or has the Town narrowly avoided its own ?bridge to nowhere??

The answers to those questions will become clear in time, but what is certain is Aurora and the Region of York will forge ahead with two pedestrian underpasses when the Region reconstructs Leslie Street next year, underpasses which are expected to connect the residential neighbourhoods of 2C west of Leslie Street with the business hub planned for the other side of the busy thoroughfare.

Council approved moving forward with these two trail connections at a cost of \$212,882, most of which will be funded by development charges (DCs), which are funds paid to municipalities by incoming developers to account for future growth.

On the flipside, their approval came with the rejection of a third underpass slated for just south of Leslie's intersection with St. John's Sideroad, one which was not supported by the Region and could have set Aurora back \$1.7 million in DC funds.

This decision was made on a 5 ? 3 vote.

For those voting in favour of forging ahead with all three underpasses, this was an opportunity that would only come Aurora's way once. For others, once was enough and money potentially earmarked for this project could be better spent elsewhere.

?At the last meeting, I spoke in favour of underpass A, and then when I heard the discussion that followed I did vote against it,? said Councillor Wendy Gaertner. ?I thought about it some more [and] as I said before, Aurora has a lot of difficulty securing east-west trail connections. The reason is the north-south trails follow the creek patterns so those areas next to the creeks aren't of any value to the developers to build homes on. On the east-west system, those trails pass through developable land and it has been a challenge.

?Underpass A is significant because it is a grade separated crossing that connects all of the off-road trails in the 2C east and west of Leslie. It also connects to the Wildlife Park and trail system in Newmarket. The Trails Master Plan was created for Aurora. Councils in the past may not have stood for that vision, but I think as a Council, knowing how important our trails system is for our community, that we need to stand behind that vision. I have been constantly talking about DCs and how they are finite because we are almost finished with our green land development. We're always aware of that money but sometimes it has to be about more than money; it has to be of the best benefit for our community.?

This view was supported by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said this project had been set as a high priority by Aurora's Parks and Recreation Department.

?I think we are missing a huge opportunity to again boost the trails system we have today and make it that much more fulfilling in terms of usage and connectivity,? said Councillor Humfries. ?I do believe we should go forward with it.?

Councillor John Abel said he sensed an opportunity as well, noting the need for an underpass under Wellington Street East that a previous Council let slip by.

Others, however, said a \$1.7 million project for an underpass that would be just 130 metres away from the main intersection was an opportunity they could sit out.

?We are quick to build this, but it might not go anywhere,? said Councillor Michael Thompson, adding land has not been secured for connecting trails on the east side of Leslie Street that would hook into this underpass. ?There is a very long list of things we would like to see funded through growth DCs and so forth. When we have a conversation and say we have only allocated \$4 million for eight underpasses, and some of these are going to be particularly expensive, yes, we could say in our next [DC Bylaw Review] we're

going to add in Underpass A, but eventually something's got to give. So, it is about the value for A. I think the money can be better spent elsewhere. Not having underpass A does not diminish our Trails Master Plan in any way. To pay \$1.7 million for Underpass A is excessive. There are other things we can use that money for that would better serve the community. While it is a nice to-do, it is not a must-have.?

Councillor Tom Mrakas agreed, cautioning legislation currently before the Ontario Legislature regarding the Development Charges act could be a game-changer in how future DCs are collected.

?I heard a lot of developers [at a recent hearing] questioning that they should even be paying cash in lieu of parkland,? he said. ?They are looking for a lot of changes and we don't know what the future holds with future legislation. We may not be able to recover that money in the future.?