

Electronic bikes and scooters should stay off local trails, says Council

Aurora's trails system should be free of e-bikes and scooters, says Council.

Last week, local lawmakers voted in favour of developing signage and an education campaign to remind trail users that these vehicles, which have exploded in popularity in recent years, have no place on local trail systems.

While mobility aids, such as electric wheelchairs, are exempt from any bylaw as far as trail usage goes, Council have directed staff to develop a campaign to inform residents and visitors of the existing prohibition of motorized vehicles on the trail systems along with installing signage at trail access points underscoring that these types of vehicles are not allowed.

The education campaign was first brought forward by Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim and while the majority of Council thought it was a step in the right direction, Councillors Rachel Gilliland and John Gallo suggested the move was premature before pinning down exactly what the Town defines as a motorized vehicle.

Aurora has one of the finest trail systems in York Region, as most of us know, said Councillor Kim, speaking to his motion last week. For a small municipality like ours, we have a well-planned trail system that is enjoyed by many residents, but in order to be enjoyed, users need to feel safe. With the onset of electric scooters, electric bikes, and even human-powered bikes that travel very fast, it's been very challenging for certain segments of the population, or indeed everybody, to feel safe and enjoy the trail system.

Our current bylaws already prohibit electric or motorized vehicles on our trails, so essentially the motion is to request that staff develop an education and communication plan to ensure every resident is aware of our bylaw and to share the trails with others for all to enjoy. I know when there's large municipal signs, most residents will abide by them. Not all, but most, and signs are a start. These steps won't solve all the issues, nor will it deter everyone from still using electric scooters or bikes on our trails, but I do believe this will be a step in the right direction.

Supporting the motion was Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who said the Town has to protect active transportation routes.

The purpose of those trails is for physical activity and transportation, he said, adding that enforcement will be the biggest challenge, including the capacity of the Town's Bylaw Department to make that happen. I'd like to see what happens with respect to enforcement because we have quite a little bit of trails around here and we're quite proud of those trails, and I'd like to see them used appropriately and safely.

Also supporting the motion was Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who said she has already fielded complaints about conventional bicycle use on the trails, let alone e-bikes.

We are already having constant complaints about bicycle speeding. To me, that should be an indication that we shouldn't be allowing any type of electric vehicle on our trails, she said, noting she did not include accessibility aids under that umbrella. We're talking about the safety of walkers and other bicyclists on the trail the children, a lot of seniors. If we're having trouble with bicycles, I think that's enough trouble.

For some Councillors, however, more work needed to be done to consider the full definition of electric vehicles, given the number of different options currently on the market.

While Councillor Gilliland said she believed an education campaign made sense, she noted the relevant bylaws as to what constitutes a vehicle in this sense haven't been updated since 2005. There are multiple different classes of e-bikes, she said, and it was rare among municipalities to issue an outright ban.

A pedal-assist mode e-bike would be something that would be considered very common for municipalities to allow on a trail versus

a motorized throttle-version of an e-bike that would not be allowed," she said. "The Ministry of Transportation has been encouraging municipalities to develop their own bylaws around this to manage this type of new technology.

"While I appreciate the intent and the motion and the educational piece, I feel like what we really need to be doing is pausing this motion and revising the bylaw to modernize the definition of e-bike in classes and have staff report back on whether or not we want to ban e-bikes outright or if we want to delineate what these classes are. From there, then I think it would make much more sense to be doing an educational piece after that fact so there's no confusion. Personally, I certainly don't want to ban e-bikes out completely without having to understand the different classes and what they mean."

While Councillor Gallo was initially supportive of the motion, he said he was "intrigued" by the issues brought forward by Councillor Gilliland.

"I feel like this is an issue of speed rather than the mode in which someone is traveling," he said. "I'm starting to believe that a little more thought should be put into this. If I had a scooter and if it was not very quick and I had a choice to be on the side of the road to get around Town, if it's treated like a bicycle versus on a trail, I would pick a trail over the road, provided there's certain speed limits and it doesn't pose any hazard to anyone else any more than a bicycle would.

"I would support exploring this a little further and determining what those classes are, if we want to allow one of the lower classes, and exploring that. Maybe we don't, I don't know, and we have to put more thought towards it " but generally, I support what we're doing here, I support the concept [but] maybe we take a step back and re-analyze it."

The motion was passed on a vote of 5 to 2.

By Brock Weir
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