

Ontario needs to step up to lower hospital parking fares: Council

By Brock Weir

If Aurora Council gets its way, it will cost you less to visit family, friends or loved ones at your local hospital.

But the buck stops at the Province of Ontario.

Councillors could pass a motion at Council this week which would request the Province to take necessary measures to allow local hospitals, such as Southlake, to 'reduce and cap' parking at a fair rate.

The motion stems from last week's General Committee meeting where John Hazelwood, representing FairHospitalParkingCharges.org, spoke of his group's advocacy to encourage municipalities to pressure the Province into making fair parking at hospitals a reality.

'We feel it is both fundamentally and morally wrong,' said Mr. Hazelwood of the 'exorbitant' parking at local hospitals.

Mr. Hazelwood's group is a small collection of people from Whitchurch-Stouffville and Markham with the ultimate goal in making a difference at Queen's Park and helping people at 'their most vulnerable moments.'

'The sick, the injured, the aged, the disabled, the chronically ill, the frantically worried and the poor cannot advocate for their need when personal healthcare crises are before them,' he said. 'In the midst of this challenging and sometimes tragic circumstances, Ontario hospitals and governments must not download budgetary pressures on the hospital clientele. We believe that hospital budgets can be achieved in a much more compassionate way.'

The group's work, he added, was not a campaign to 'undermine' the work of hospitals, but a matter of seeking what they believe is fairness across the board.

The motion to ask the Premier and the Minister of Long Term Care to upload whatever necessary to make this a reality was formed by Councillors at the table. While it has the majority support of Councillors going this week, their support was not without conditions.

While debating the motion, Councillors were cautious about the ramifications of such a motion, concerned that the users and taxpayers could be adversely impacted.

'We have to be careful the impact doesn't come back on the province with respect to how they fund this and they look at the overall program and [make sure] it is balanced so it doesn't come back,' said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. 'They're going to have to find the money somewhere, but it is important to look at.'

Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, for instance, sits on the Southlake Board. He told Mr. Hazelwood that parking is an important revenue source for the hospitals and what he suggested could be alternative funding. Mr. Hazelwood said he understood that, and that's why they are taking it to the province to that planning.

He has taken his group to meet with MPPs and CEOs of hospitals within York Region and beyond and their answer is simple 'they don't want to see the parking revenue depleted,' he said.

'Southlake is running at a budget deficit and closed beds and laid off nurses,' said Mayor Dawe. 'That revenue is important, so if you take the revenue off the parking it has to come from somewhere else. There is only one place it is coming from 'the taxpayer. Anything else and we're fooling ourselves. We have to accept that is how it is going to happen and I really think the whole issue of hospital funding has to be investigated.'

From the perspective of Councillor Evelyn Buck, it is going to be the users who are going to feel the impact in the end. People pay for it as users, pay for it as contributors to provincial health care, and pay for use of facilities.

?We pay, and we pay, and we pay,? she said. ?I am surprised it has taken this long for families of ill patients, seriously ill patients, and not all of them old, that there hasn't been some sort of movement within our community before now to demand that the province pay attention to this very serious human problem in our province.

?I would like to support this resolution if it was better informed, if some time was spent learning exactly how our hospitals function and who is responsible for the decision we're joining in a protest against, and that is the high fees charged for parking while you are visiting a very ill relative.?