

Region needs to lower 'ridiculous' fees on underpasses, says Councillor

By Brock Weir

Two new pedestrian underpasses on Leslie Street between St. John's Sideroad and Wellington Street are set to move forward this week, but final costs have yet to be pinned down.

Sitting at the Committee Level last week, Council gave the tentative green light to moving ahead with the trail underpasses. Part of a 50-50 cost sharing deal with the Region of York when they begin reconstruction of Leslie Street this year, the underpasses are designed to be a connection between the emerging neighbourhoods in Aurora's 2C developments on the west side of Leslie and the planned business parks in the east.

With Aurora's share clocking in at nearly \$902,000, excluding any additional costs the Town might decide to invest later on to provide illumination, the ballooning price tag has repeatedly come before Council for consideration.

But, last week, Councillors said enough time had passed to make a decision.

'I think it is imperative we move forward with this underpass,' said Councillor Sandra Humfries, following a delegation from long-time trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg. 'We have delayed it a couple of times, we went back to Trails and Active Transportation (committee) and at the last meeting it was unanimously agreed that it needed to move forward and we should not be wavering from the path we started.'

'There is going to be much development of employment lands where the only way [you can get there] if this doesn't occur is by driving and I think it is imperative we move forward. I really hope we have the support around the table to really get this back on track.'

Indeed, they did.

'We have been talking about this for years,' said Mayor Geoff Dawe, 'so I really do think it is time for action and, at some point, I would like to suggest to the Trails Committee that we look at an underpass on Wellington.'

Before that hits the table, though, some Councillors said they wanted firmer numbers on what the final price tag might be for the two underpasses in question.

Speaking in favour of the paths, Councillor Tom Mrakas said the Trails Committee had a bit of frustration when they found the underpasses were before them again for further consideration after signing off on them multiple times. The committee was firm, he said, that not moving forward now would be a lost opportunity. Nevertheless, he renewed his criticism of the Region charging Aurora 12 per cent fees on the underpass for administration and inspection costs.

Councillor Mrakas' motion calling on the Region to waive these fees was approved by Committee, with the caveat the project still go ahead if that waiver didn't come.

'As everyone knows, I think it is absolutely insane that the Region is charging us, the municipality, a six per cent administration fee and that inspection cost,' he said. 'We don't do it when we work on projects with them. If they want [it from] us, we can start charging them. If they don't waive it, I suggest we start charging them on any projects that we work on with them.'

'I want to move forward regardless of what the Region says; I just want to make them aware that we're not okay with this charge, and to let them know that if they are going to continue charging this we will charge them back.'

As far as costs go, there are other uncertainties.

Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said that should the projects clear the final hurdle at Council this week, he will approach the Town of Newmarket for possible cost sharing for the underpass connecting to the trails aligning with the Aurora-Newmarket border.

In the view of Councillor Wendy Gaertner, leaving illumination out of the equation is out of the question and should be considered along with making sure the trails can be accessed from Leslie Street.

Aurora is negotiating with the Region on an 'electrical drop' to help offset some costs Aurora might incur on lighting the tunnels, said Mr. Downey. But, he noted, costs for the lighting and access to street level remains uncertain.