

Region pushes for reimbursement after Province cancels speed camera program

The Region of York is calling for reimbursement from the Province after Queen's Park moved to cancel speed camera programs Ontario-wide ? but Aurora's Regional rep, Mayor Tom Mrakas, suggests such a move might be premature.

Premier Doug Ford announced Thursday morning the government intends to introduce legislation that would ban the use of municipal automated speed enforcement (ASE) cameras across the Province, arguing they were being used as a form of revenue rather than as a means to improve road safety.

Instead, the Province will introduce a new fund to help municipalities ?implement alternative safety measures, including proactive traffic-calming initiatives like speed bumps, roundabouts, raised crosswalks and curb extensions,? as well as public education and improved signage to slow down drivers.

?At a time when governments at all levels should be doing everything they can to lower costs and make life more affordable, too many municipalities are using speed cameras as a cash grab,? said Premier Ford in a statement. ?Enough is enough. Instead of making life more expensive by sending speeding tickets to drivers weeks after the fact, we're supporting road-safety measures that will prevent speeding in the first place, keep costs down, and keep our streets safe.?

While the Town of Aurora never installed ASE cameras on local streets, cameras in the community, such as those on Yonge Street, were installed by the Region.

The Premier's announcement last Thursday morning coincided with a meeting of Regional Council where questions were raised around the practicality of alternative speed controls on Regional roads, how to keep roads safe, as well as how the Region might be reimbursed by the Province for the money spent on existing cameras.

?The debate's been going on for a week or two now, a month or two now, and what I just want to say is?the experts, the Ontario Safety League, the Association of Chiefs of Police, SickKids Hospital, the people who spend their every waking hour trying to save the lives of children and adults, endorse the program, and support the program,? said Newmarket Mayor John Taylor. ?They know it works, they know it saves lives.

?This program could be reduced in scope by 75 per cent, still leaving municipalities with a handful of cameras as tools to use in really important spots, spots where crises occur, or, heaven forbid, a death occurs or a child is injured?. Please don't talk to me about flashing signs and speed humps. We've been there and done that for decades. We know what truly works, what truly is effective, and that's speed cameras and safety cameras.?

Markham Mayor Frank Scarpitti said it was ?presumptuous? of the Province to say they will give municipalities money for other initiatives ?when municipalities have paid millions and millions of dollars for equipment? for the program and these investments were made in ?good faith.?

Scarpitti moved a motion, which was approved on a vote of 17 ? 1, to call on the Province for reimbursement.

?Let's put a few speed humps on Regional roads and maybe in six months' time, we'll see new legislation that says, ?No, no, take those out. We were just kidding. We didn't mean for you to put in speed humps to slow down speeders in school zones with speed humps,? he said. ?If the Province of Ontario thinks that we're going to saddle our property taxpayers with the costs that have not been covered because they've now decided to change their direction of what they want municipalities to do in relation to speeding in school zones, we're not going to pass that onto property taxpayers and the Province of Ontario? should [be] reimbursing the Region, local municipalities that have spent the money to put in place a program that was authorized by the Province of Ontario.?

Richmond Hill Mayor David West was of a similar view, who said the financial implications of cancelling the program were

important ? a view shared by Regional staff who said there will be implications for staff members who were hired to implement the ASE program ? and speed control alternatives offered by the Province fell short of the mark.

?There's no way that our emergency services are going to be able to navigate in an emergency, when they are in a hurry, speed bumps,? he said. ?Signs with flashing lights aren't going to be equivalent in terms of safety improvements to a program like ASE. If there's some idea out there that will actually be equivalent to the safety improvements that we're seeing with ASE then I'm all ears.

?What I am hearing so far about putting in flashing lights?it's not going to work. I guess the other thing is the speed bumps on Regional roads, I mean that can't happen. We can't have fire trucks, police cars and ambulances who are in a hurry to get to where they need to go having to slow down over speed bumps. I think we need to inject a dose of reality into what I've heard so far.?

While Mayor Mrakas, Aurora's representative at the Regional table, was not present for the vote on the motion calling on the Province for reimbursement, in a statement following the meeting he expressed some caution.

?I am aware that some governments want the Province to fully reimburse municipalities for ASE installation and implementation costs. While this perspective is understandable, it's important to recognize that ASE was originally designed as a cost-recovery initiative, with revenues intended to offset equipment and operational expenses,? he said. ?It would make sense then that municipalities first use the revenues they've collected to offset their program expenses before asking for reimbursement.

?Transparency is essential. Municipalities should clearly show how those revenues generated by the ASE program have been allocated, particularly in relation to their intended purpose of road and traffic safety initiatives. If the funds were not spent on these priorities but directed elsewhere, it would be difficult, in my opinion, to justify additional financial support from the Province. Where ASE revenues are insufficient to cover program costs, it may be appropriate to request the Province to consider addressing the shortfall. However, municipalities should first demonstrate responsible use of collected revenues. Transparency and accountability are key ? after all, there is only one taxpayer.?

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