

Region's Orchard Heights fencing project on hold: Mayor

By Brock Weir

The land around a Regional reservoir near Orchard Heights has been enjoyed by residents for its greenspace and trails for years, but the Region's plans to fence the area citing liability concerns has been put on hold following opposition from neighbours.

While Mayor Geoff Dawe, Aurora's representative at the Region, said the Region remains committed to the fencing plan, he told concerned residents over social media that following a meeting on Thursday, plans are temporarily on hold.

?The Region has a number of these properties and I have been informed that this is the only one not fenced,? said Mayor Dawe. ?Regional staff are committed to moving forward with a fencing project to protect the integrity of the reservoir. However, after coordinating a meeting with representatives from the Town of Aurora and the Region, there is a better understanding of the proposal and its impacts.?

Worries from residents were brought to the podium at last week's Council meeting by David Fielding who said the public has been able to ?enjoy? these lands since the pumping station was built over 30 years ago.

?The park is used by the public for numerous leisure activities, including hiking, physical fitness training, [and]stargazing as it is an excellent vista point over the Town of Aurora,? he said. ?In the Aurora Trails Master Plan, the hill has been identified as one of the few lookout points in Aurora.

?Our trail system is important for Aurora residents. The Region's project manager tells me the Region is installing the fence for liability reasons, the feeling is the Region can fence off liability if something happens on the hill or surrounding area. I don't think this is a valid reason for installing a fence. This liability fits on all public lands and nothing has changed there recently to make this an issue that would require such a drastic measure as installing a fence.?

Following the Mayor's meeting, however, he assured those concerned the fencing project would not have an impact on the area's east/west trail connection, but it could be a different story for the north/south connection near Orchard Heights.

?Both the Town and Regional Staff will be working together to maintain some kind of north/south access,? said Mayor Dawe. ?I expect to hear back from them by the end of February and will keep you informed as this project develops.?

Following Mr. Fielding's delegation to Council, a number of Councillors expressed similar concerns, including trying to get input from the Town's Trails and Active Transportation Committee. As the area has been in use by the public for decades, Councillor Michael Thompson said ?clarity? was needed over the issue as the property also boasts signage from the Town.

?We owe it to the residents to make sure we're clear and they have been consulted before we fence off a right of way that has been in use for over 30 years,? said Councillor Thompson. ?It is just common courtesy. I think we should be looking at why these things aren't being discussed back and forth.?

Added Councillor John Abel: ?There are concrete pads all over Town for [York Region Transit] that doesn't go on half the routes, so I don't think they consult with us on all matters.?