

School board should chip in on student safety at Aurora Heights P.S.: Council

The York Region District School Board should step up to the plate to help fund new measures designed to protect the safety of students walking to and from Aurora Heights Public School, according to Council.

Meeting at the Committee level last week, local lawmakers gave a tentative green light to several safety proposals stemming from a working group tasked with reviewing pedestrian safety for students and families in the area.

These recommendations include a layby lane on the east side of Tecumseh Drive along the frontage of Aurora Heights Public School and prohibition of parking at all times on the south and east sides of Kitimat Crescent near the school.

Should these new measures receive final approval at Council at the end of this month, \$125,000 for construction of the layby lane will be included in Aurora's 2021 Capital Budget, but Council is hoping they will have a partner in this endeavor in the local school board.

"If I were to pick and choose the projects [outlined by the working group], this is one I feel is going to solve the problem at hand with the amount of children safely being dropped off at school," said Councillor Rachel Gilliland voicing her support for the layby.

The layby was also supported by Councillor John Gallo, but not necessarily the funding model suggested by staff.

"I can see where there's an argument that kids going to that school are Aurora residents, they are our kids and we have an obligation to make sure they are safe [but] I don't know where the line is drawn in terms of responsibility for this type of project," said Councillor Gallo of the layby. "We don't build schools and while obviously we are in favour of safe transportation of our children to the schools, where does the responsibility lie? Does it lie [with] the school boards to make sure their school grounds are safe, or is it incumbent upon us?"

"I don't remember doing something like this before. I don't remember paying for something like this before. I am just throwing it out there that I think it is a great idea and it should be done. I just don't know whether it is our responsibility to do it, I don't know whether it is our taxpayers' responsibility to pay for this. We don't build schools; it is the Board's responsibility to make sure their schools are safe."

As Councillor Gallo said he was concerned that footing the full bill could set a precedent for Aurora, Councillor Wendy Gaertner offered a similar view.

?Our responsibility is to take care of the children and to make sure they're safe, but I don't think it is our responsibility to be doing this financially,? she said. ?It just does not sit well. We're all tight for money. We're asking all the residents of the Town to take over this responsibility. It belongs to the school board and it is up to the school board to improve the safety of their schools.?

Mayor Tom Mrakas said he too was concerned about setting a precedent with the school board.

?A lot of the schools that have been built a long time ago have probably fallen into some similar situation,? he said. ?So, what is going to happen is we're going to start paying for laybys. At minimum, the conversation shouldn't even begin unless it is looking at splitting the costs. That should be the starting point, and let's work towards where we go from there. It shouldn't be the Town that's on the hook for full construction costs.?

By Brock Weir