

?Shared Space? principle to be looked at as local traffic solution

By Brock Weir

Aurora could look to experimental models in Europe and pockets of the United States to improve safety for both pedestrians and drivers.

That is, if Councillor Chris Ballard gets his way.

Councillors have approved a motion brought forward by Councillor Ballard asking staff to put together a report on whether the principles of ?shared space? would be worth looking into for Aurora.

The European principle, which removes many of the barriers that separate drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists is based on the theory that people will be more cautious, pedestrians more aware, and drivers slower if they are sharing space with each other.

In successful experiments and implementations carried out in some of Europe's more compact and congested communities, things like traffic signs, curbs and road markings were taken down to foster the sense drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists were all on the road together.

Rather than making it a free-for-all, proponents argue that these models have resulted in slower drivers, the feeling the situation might be ?unsafe? makes users more aware, and also helps re-evaluate the dominance of drivers on local roadways.

?We all know the issues Aurora faces in our downtown core with people, cyclists, cars and trucks all trying to get through the area,? said Councillor Ballard. ?We have studied Yonge and Wellington to death and other areas looking for solutions and [looking] for potential outside-the-box solutions, I came across ?shared space', which has been used for more than 30 years in places like Holland and Germany.?

While Councillor Ballard didn't say it would necessarily be a good fit for Aurora's traffic situation, he said it was worth investigating to stay just a little bit ahead of the curve. When former mayor John West floated the idea of roundabouts at intersections, Councillor Ballard said West was laughed at, despite support from Town Planners. Now, that particular traffic control measure is becoming more and more prominent within the community.

?Shared Space has worked very well in areas that weren't designed to handle the volume of traffic and people we have today,? said Councillor Ballard. ?[This might] be something we could work at in some parts of the Aurora Promenade on a trial basis. We can start trying to solve some of our traffic and mobility issues throughout the Promenade.?

Although he wasn't at last week's Council meeting, Councillor Ballard said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure, ?encouraged? him to bring something like this forward because he saw some potential application.

?People within the department have said it is a worthwhile endeavour to look at a potential solutions to some of the [issues] we have downtown,? said Councillor Ballard. ?I think in terms of investigating all opportunities, it is well worth it.?

While Councillor Wendy Gaertner said it was a good idea to explore, others cast their doubts before ultimately deciding to at least put the leg work in on seeing if there would be any local practicality. Councillor Paul Pirri, for instance, cited what might be concerned for people with accessibility issues in Aurora. These include people who might be visual or hearing impaired that rely on traffic signals of sight and sound to help guide them through the more precarious traffic situations.

?We would be looking at, in some cases, to remove the rules of the road,? said Councillor Pirri. ?I think coming at that from an individual who is completely able-bodied, that sounds great. I will look out and hear cars coming. I don't think this is necessarily an accessible plan. Someone who has vision difficulties won't see a car coming and if there are no rules to the road, how would that prevent them?

?Someone with hearing issues and [might not] hear a honk.?

For Councillor Evelyn Buck, changing the ?rules of the road? would have more of a ?psychological? impact.

?It is a complete retraining of people's minds and what they do in Europe and ancient towns in tiny little streets is apples and oranges [to Aurora],? she said.

Added Councillor Ballard: ?Traffic engineers will tell you one of the most dangerous places for pedestrians to be is the pedestrian crosswalk because we assume we stick our finger out and the cars will stop and, in fact, they often don't. This is based on that sort of psychology where you take away that level of assuredness because there are all sorts of rules that people will generally be more cautious.?