

Studies will help and encourage students to walk to school safely



By Brock Weir

It might now be safe to say spring has finally arrived, and with the arrival of the season, parents across Aurora are once again sending their kids packing ? off to walk to school, that is.

As an increasing number of children take over sidewalks on their way to school, spring is a time drivers need to be extra vigilant. But there could soon be measures put in place in at least one Aurora neighbourhood as early as this month to protect students, parents, and drivers.

Following long-standing concerns from parents and staff at Devins Drive Public School, Aurora Councillors are due to consider a new three-way stop this week at the intersection of Kemano Road and Banff Drive, as well as new pedestrian crossings, speed changes, and other road markings in the area.

Although parents and staff are not due to get all they have asked for ? a three-way stop requested for Crawford Rose Drive and Valley Crescent has been nixed ? it is the first significant step Aurora has taken since endorsing its School Travel Planning and Traffic Management Plan last fall.

The plan was first developed and adopted by Council in December with assistance from York Region Community and Health Services. It is intended to address traffic surrounding schools, particularly during peak pick-up and drop-off times, promote injury prevention, and also encourage kids to get moving.

The plan was adopted by the Region in October to address these traffic issues, ?while promoting healthy, sustainable communities, physical activity, and improved air quality,? according to Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure.

Where some schools were once able to handle traffic and pedestrians with ease, growth has often thrown challenges in keeping these areas on track.

?Many factors impact how the operation of a school site can change over time,? said Mr. Simanovskis in his report. ?Growth in the community, increasing school population, changes to traffic patterns, community development and changes to school catchment boundaries all impact how students get to school.?

The first course of action often taken by parents or the school is to request traffic controls, but that can come head-to-head with parents who drive their kids, he said. Minimal relief and maximum frustration are often the result, he added.

The strategy endorsed by Aurora promotes an increase in walking to school not just to reduce the number of cars in a school zone, but also to promote student health. It also builds on the success of York Region schools that have actively promoted walking to

school, including Aurora's Rick Hansen Public School which implemented 'Walking Wednesdays', reducing the amount of vehicle traffic around the school by a whopping 93 per cent.

Focusing on 'School Travel Planning', the development of such plans requires stakeholders like schools, and parents to work together to find common ground. There is only so much Aurora can do with addressing traffic issues, notes Mr. Simanovskis, so focusing on moving students safely to and from school is a more productive approach.

'A significant effort is currently required to address traffic complaints brought forward by a school. By moving towards the school travel planning approach, this effort can be refocused to addressing travel planning across the catchment area in a targeted way with an increase in overall benefits and safety for the school community. A comprehensive approach engages the whole community and the results are more sustainable.'

The long-standing concerns of the Devins Drive Public School community are the first to be addressed through this new approach. Over the course of the year, parents have come to Council to speak about initiatives they are taking within their own schools to promote safe travels, including a trial run with a 'human school bus' to keep students walking together.