

Town needs trails donation account

During this month's meeting of the Trails and Active Transportation Committee, a recommendation was made, to establish a Trails Donation Account.

The account is meant to facilitate donations for which tax receipts will be issued.

The donations would be used to pay for the purchase of off-road trails right-of-ways across private lands, and for structures that are necessary to be able to safely cross major roads and railroad tracks.

In Aurora, the off-road trails that we do have are pretty well all routed through parks, valley lands, and conservation lands. Just about all of those lands have been acquired free of charge, mostly during the land development process.

Two years ago, the Aurora Trails Master Plan was adopted, by the current Council. Before that, there was an outline of a trails network vision in the Official Plan, which was not binding during the land development process.

While there were budget allocations for the construction of trails, and even a boardwalk, no Aurora Council has spent any tax dollars for the purchase of off-road trail lands, or other needed structures.

In order to eventually retrofit Aurora with a Town wide off-road trails network, in line with the Aurora Trails Master Plan, it will be necessary to buy privately owned table lands, for connectors and spurs, and for perhaps some sections of trails. It will also be necessary to construct grade separating structures, to allow the self-propelled trail users to safely cross major roads, and railroad tracks, under or above these corridors, which were built to facilitate the motorized traffic.

As an example, the Nokkidaa Trail, which runs in the Holland River valley, crosses all major Newmarket roads in a grade separated fashion - but not in Aurora. That needs to change. Also, the Oak Ridges Trail, running east-west through Aurora, should cross the Rail tracks and Industrial Parkway South, in a grade separated fashion.

It will not be cheap to create the grade separated crossings for those major trails. Nor will it be cheap to buy private lands, at market prices. In order to facilitate such undertakings, a donation account could be used, at least for partial funding.

The Cousins Drive crossing of the rail tracks and the Industrial Parkway is regularly used by commuting students and employees, as well as the recreation oriented residents from the south-east quadrant of our Town. Traffic on the Industrial road has already increased, over the last few years. Traffic on the rail tracks as well as on that road can be expected to increase substantially, still, over the coming years. It is time for a safe, grade separated crossing of those two major traffic arteries, for the self-propelled traffic. That is for the sake of all of the current users, and for those who will use this routing, if it were safer.

In a statistically valid survey conducted during the study that led to the latest revision of the Recreation and Parks Master Plan, Aurora's residents heavily favored spending tax dollars on trails infrastructure. But that is not happening.

There is reason to believe that the residents of Aurora are willing to pay for getting more acceptable trails infrastructure, and are willing to donate - provided that they can be assured that those donations will be used to advance Aurora's off-road Trails Network.

That is what a Trails Donation Account is meant to facilitate.

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