

Heritage trees top of mind in proposed sidewalk connecting Library Square to park

Protecting and preserving heritage trees in Aurora's historic downtown core were top of mind last week as Council considered a new sidewalk on Metcalfe Street intended to act as a link between Town Park and the new Library Square development.

As The Auroran reported last week, Council is due to consider moving forward with design work for a new sidewalk on the north side of the street to serve pedestrians accessing the Town's Cultural Precinct.

The recommendation nixes a previously proposed pathway through the parking lot of Trinity Anglican Church and the property belonging to the apartment building lying immediately north of the place of worship. Instead, up for consideration is a 1.5 metre-wide sidewalk that would run for a length of 155 metres.

Staff admitted there were some challenges to the proposal, including impacts to a private property on the southwest corner of Metcalfe and Wells Streets, and this property, particularly the heritage trees on site, raised concerns around the Council table.

"I think we're all concerned with regards to the heritage trees on the property at the corner," said Councillor Michael Thompson at last week's General Committee meeting. "I think that any design that comes forward needs to be able to satisfy Council and the residents that there will be no impact to those trees."

"I do agree with the principle behind it in that we're trying to further the connections between Town Park and Library Square. It is something that has always been envisioned. It was in the Promenade Plan but it was more of a mid-block connection that went up the middle. I am happy to explore this and have further conversation once some initial design work is done in-house and presented to us at Budget so we can have a fuller debate at that time."

Councillor Sandra Humfries offered a similar view. Walkability, she said, was important to the Cultural Precinct but she said she wanted guarantees the stand of large trees at the corner would not be damaged by any future sidewalk construction.

"I want a guarantee that they won't be affected," she said. "I need that guarantee because it would be an absolute shame. Those trees are designated Aurora heritage and we certainly can't harm them. They are beautiful and we want to see them for years to come."

Councillor Gilliland went a step further and requested that a study by an arborist be carried out before any significant work is done.

"If the arborist deems it is not going to be safe or it is going to damage the trees, then we have our answer," she said, before raising the issue of whether a sidewalk on the north side of Metcalfe is ideal to serve Library Square. "I just don't see the droves of people that are going to be overtaking one side of the sidewalk that is not going to allow people to come to and from Library Square. I just don't feel it is a priority right now. If we're going to move forward with some kind of inquiry, it would be more or less an arborist view of whether or not the trees would be at risk and that is as far as I think we should go at this time."

Similarly, Councillor John Gallo agreed that the proposal does not follow "the most natural route."

"If there was a mid-block connection, that to me would make the most sense," he said. "I am still a bit on the fence on the necessity for this initial sidewalk. My preference would be that mid-block just seems the right way to go, but if the impact is greater than the benefit it doesn't make sense. I think just some more time should be spent [to find] an appropriate solution. I would be in favour of just pushing it to Budget and finding out the costs and moving forward. I think some more work needs to be done."

Councillor Thompson responded that he didn't disagree with Councillor Gallo that a mid-block connection was ideal, but given the view a mid-block as previously proposed would have a negative impact on parking spaces serving apartment buildings on Wells Street, that the ideal might not be possible.

?That is what I am hoping to get as we go to the next stage: have staff spend the time and the energy to create a fulsome report, be it through an arborist, through engineering, just to be able to satisfactorily answer everybody's concerns and/or questions because?I think it needs to satisfy beyond any doubt that the trees and the property will not suffer negatively,? he said.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter