

Leslie Street underpasses nearly double in price since first proposed

By Brock Weir

The Region of York is set to begin the reconstruction of Leslie Street next year and, pending Council's final approval, two pedestrian trail underpasses along with it.

The future of these two trail underpasses, however, remains up in the air after the price for completion was found to have nearly doubled since first proposed.

Council voted at last week's General Committee meeting to postpone their final decision on increasing its 50 per cent contribution to the \$901,960 bill by just under \$150,000 pending further comments from Aurora's Trails Committee.

According to a report from Jim Tree, Aurora's Manager of Parks, the Region has increased Aurora's 50 per cent contribution by \$148,336 to account for current market values.

Council first approved going 50/50 with the Region on these trail underpasses last year, with the majority of the funds coming out of Development Charges. At that time, the total cost of the project was approved at \$743,624, but the first proposal came in even lower. When this first appeared before us, the cost of those underpasses was \$475,000, said Councillor Michael Thompson. In 2015, it came back to us and it was a couple of hundred thousand dollars more, and now it has come back to us again and it is a couple of hundred thousand dollars more. It has gone from \$475,000 with the initial Class D estimate to now \$900,000.

And this, he pointed out, was just for bare bones underpasses. There will be further costs to light them at night and to account for any other amenities.

This is the third increase you have seen, said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, adding that if Council approves the budget increase it might not be the last time they have to put money towards the underpasses as the Region says there might be overages on the contract. We have come back to Council twice now asking for more money. I really don't want to come back a third time, but this is a Regionally controlled project and all I am doing is providing information from the Region saying this is how much it is going to cost if you still want to do it.

I am coming back and saying here it is. I don't know whether or not they are going to be coming back or not. If there happen to be overages on this contract they may very well be asking us to pay those overages as well.

Asked to ballpark how much more it might be to illuminate the underpasses, Mr. Downey said there is currently no point of reference in Aurora to compare it to.

Also factoring into the cost is a 12 per cent charge from the Region to the Town for administration costs.

That is a pretty hefty charge to our residents, said Councillor Tom Mrakas. I am astonished that they are charging us 12 per cent. That is unbelievable.

Unbelievable or not, some Council members said outside of the final price tag, they questioned spending this much on trail underpasses that might essentially go nowhere. Although one of the two underpasses is slated to connect to the Smart Centres development near 404, the other might provide little more than a loop, they contended.

This may be short sighted on my part, but I really can't see supporting location C, said Mayor Geoff Dawe on the potential loop.

Where is it going to go? In the long term, I don't see it. I am pleased to have Mr. Downey jump in and convince me otherwise, but I can't see where it is going to come to a complete trail connection because it is going to be contingent [on other factors].

These factors, he said, include land developments in planned subdivisions as well as the long-distance goal of having an interchange at 404 and St. John's Sideroad.

We haven't brought it to Council yet. I think over the next year we should be able to secure those lands just east of Leslie Street, said Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning. As we move further east, there is a separate application that we're dealing with that might be a little more contingent on the timing of the future interchange at

St. John's and the 404.

Added Michael Thompson. [To proceed] there has to be a reasonable probability of those trails actually being established in the future.

Past reports on the trails underpasses are set to be presented once again to Councillors at a later date to allow newer members of Council to get up to speed on how the underpass plan has developed.

The Region must have the Town's final decision by the end of the year, according to Mr. Tree's report, so it can be removed from York's reconstruction contract for Leslie Street.