

Parking changes cause problems for medical building

By Brock Weir

Parking restrictions in Aurora's Downtown Core continue to have a ripple effect, leaving a long-operating medical building caught in the crosshairs of a heated Council discussion last week.

According to Councillor John Abel, newly-instituted three hour parking limits in the area, particularly Kennedy Street, are causing problems for the Aurora Medical Centre. In a notice of motion submitted to Councillors last week, he said the three-hour parking restrictions are keeping staff from parking on the streets, leaving patients, including seniors, to make the uphill hike to their appointments.

He suggested the Town issue parking permits to staffers at no cost but, with area neighbours now required to pay \$400 a year to park on their own streets, Council balked, arguing it could cause a double standard with one set of rules for residents and another for businesses.

"The owner of the medical facility has advised me that the new parking restriction has imposed a great hardship on the operation," said Councillor Abel. "He has instructed his able staff while they do a shift to park on Kennedy and parts of Gurnett to allow the spots for the people that really require it. Now they are getting ticketed.

"He has appealed to me and Council to consider an allowance for the staff because if they park in their parking spaces that means people that can use it for three hours would be the ones that have the difficulties and they would be the ones using walkers and canes, etc., and would have to walk up the slope and up the street."

First to voice his concern to the suggestion was Councillor Paul Pirri, who said by going down this route Council would be making a decision based on a "siloed" one-off complaint without looking at the bigger picture.

"We're not looking at this from a holistic point of view," he said, questioning the legal ramifications of such a move. "We're not looking at this from any sort of planning process."

Councillor Michael Thompson added he agreed things need to be looked at from a holistic point of view. While this is just one particular business in question, giving its employees free parking permits might have wide-spread ripples.

"We're charging residents around Town Park \$400 to park at Town Park for the year," he said. "If I was one of those residents I think I would be noticeably upset that just a few blocks away, the Town is making special provisions. Then, all of a sudden I'm thinking why them and not me? When we first did it, we had some of those residents speaking to us and that is what we put in place.

"I think if we're going to make parking permits, we have to have the same system for both: either everybody pays or nobody pays. I have an issue that with this particular one it is no cost. I think you have to look at it from the big picture."

While Council ultimately voted to refer Councillor Abel's motion to staff for a practical and legal comment, as well as the newly-reconstituted Traffic Safety Advisory Committee, which is expected to gear up this fall, he said he wanted to see a solution without a delay.

"The ones that are effected are the ones that are most vulnerable," he said. "If we're going to be moving these people further away it is more of an arduous journey. You can paint it any way you want it, I am just addressing the needs of the ones who are most vulnerable. It is within our Council's discretion to allow a small exemption on seven to nine parking spots as identified right on Kennedy and a couple on Gurnett.

"It is very simple. If you had an elderly parent who was going there for quarterly visits and then they came home and said they had a fall because they had to go up the slope on Kennedy in the winter because staff were there, you might feel a little empathy for them." Councillor Abel's comment struck a nerve with some of his colleagues, including Councillor Jeff Thom who said nobody was looking to "cast anyone out" to a far-flung parking area.

"It is always busy, there have always been parking issues, I get that, but we did implement parking restrictions to solve the parking of the GO commuters and it certainly is causing some unintended consequences. But, to solve one, we really do have to take a bird's eye view and make sure we're not just putting a Band-Aid on one area just to have it crop up in another area."

Added Councillor Paul Pirri: I take offence to the picture drawing that anybody who is opposed to this is in favour of having elderly citizens fall down on the ground. My grandmother does use the facility on a quarterly basis, so Councillor Abel's argument, like the seniors he's talking about, falls flat on its face. If we're thinking about really fixing this issue, what we would be doing is putting parking spots designated for people with disabilities on site so that people who really do need to use the parking close to the facility can do that."