

Trail users might have to settle for two of three Leslie Street underpasses

By Brock Weir

People using Aurora's trail system hoping for a series of underpasses once the Region of York reconstructs Leslie Street could be in for some good news and bad news this week.

Council is set to move forward on two of three pedestrian underpasses proposed for Leslie Street after deciding at the Committee level last week that \$1.75 million for an underpass less than 200 metres from a main intersection is the best way to use public money.

After giving tentative approval to two underpasses in 2013 with financial support from the Region, the future of a third underpass 130 metres south of the Leslie and St. John's Sideroad hung in the balance without getting a commitment of Regional dollars.

'In view of the Region's position on this underpass, Aurora would be required to fund the project 100 per cent,' said Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, in a report to Council. 'The Region has indicated that their tendering policy will not permit an unfunded project to be included in a Regional Tender and, as such, it will not be possible to carry this item in the Region's tender unless the Town of Aurora commits to funding the underpass project.'

While Mr. Downey told Councillors last week he and his department ranked this particular trail underpass as 'important' despite its costs, many balked at the high price tag for such a relatively short distance.

'I think that is a fairly large sum of money,' said Councillor Paul Pirri. 'Granted, it is coming out of our DCs (development charges), but our DCs can be used in other locations. The only way I can see this specific underpass really being of a need is if they were trying to enter the business park [slated to be part of the 2C development]. If they are walking to work, that is something great, but there are alternative routes I think are quite easy to get to and quite easy to travel.'

This was a view shared by Councillor Tom Mrakas who said Aurora can 'find something better to spend \$1.8 million on' considering these trails will already be connected a short distance away at two further underpasses.

'When we're footing the whole bill, I think we can find something better for that money,' he said.

Mayor Geoff Dawe also said he saw other potential trail underpasses as a higher priority than this one, particularly in the area of Wellington Street East and John West Way, as did Councillor Michael Thompson who said Council needs to be careful in how it spends Development Charges (DCs).

While DCs are funds paid to the municipality by developers to account for future growth, Aurora is nearing build-out and these funds currently rolling in from the development of 2C are going to slow to a trickle once the only source for DCs become infill projects.

'We have seen from the 10 year capital forecast that in 2019 and 2020, the DCs will be down to only \$2 million because of all the other projects we have,' he said. 'When I talk about priorities and I talk about identifying where you want to spend the money, if we only have \$4 million collected for all these [underpasses], this one is going to take 40 per cent. Is this the priority out of all the other projects that are out there? In my opinion, it is not.'

'It is only 130 metres to the intersection. We are talking about spending 1.75 million for an underpass. It is like \$13,000 per metre. It is worthy of consideration. Even though it is DC eligible and DC funds are there, DCs are still a finite amount of money. I would rather take that money and invest it in other ways.'

The underpass, however, had its support from Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said it could be beneficial once 2C is fully built,

while Councillor Wendy Gaertner said she was not necessarily opposed to it, but questioned whether the funds should be spent if this trail was not going to be maintained in the winter and, thus, only be usable by residents essentially from May to October.

On hand to promote the trail underpass was avid trail advocate Klaus Wehrenberg who has been stumping for all three underpasses for years. From his perspective, time is of the essence in moving forward.

?Commuters will likely outnumber the recreational users,? he said. ?A goodly number of residents who are moving into the homes now being built will want to reach the planned places of employment on the east side of Leslie. There will be 8,000 residents on the west side and 6,000 employment opportunities on the east. How much more compelling a reason could you have to make the commuting back and forth convenient and inviting than by putting in the grade separated crossings?

?The Leslie Street reconstruction provides an opportunity to include trail underpasses at incremental costs. A similar opportunity?will not present itself again.?