

Board goes along with keeping school bus in Caledon East

By Bill Rea

The discussions have been going on for about a year, and they concluded Tuesday night, with smiles on the faces of several parents of students at Caledon East Public School.

The Peel District School Board unanimously passed a motion agreeing with a recommendation from Student Transportation of Peel Region (STOPR) to reinstate bus service along Airport Road for students living north of Larry Street.

"I think that speaks loudly of the board's commitment to student safety," Board Chair Janet McDougald commented as the motion passed.

STOPR, the consortium that decides busing eligibility for Peel's two school boards, had announced about a year ago that busing to the school will be cancelled for students living north of Larry Street and east of Airport Road.

As well, trustees voted to pursue recovering costs for the reinstated bus service from the Town of Caledon, and to look into the legal obligations of the Town to provide safe walking paths for children.

A report to trustees from Board Controller of Corporate Support Services David Neale stated STOPR issued notices to parents last spring that eligibility to the area in question was being removed because of a reassessment of the situation. The report added that decision was based on confirmation from the Town that the sidewalks of Airport Road were safe for pedestrians, and that a crossing guard would be hired.

Parents raised concerns about the decision, and trustees last year agreed to keep the bus for one more year, to allow the various parties, including the Town and Peel Region to work on finding solutions.

Neale's report stated there have been safety improvements that have either been put in place or are pending, including a community safety zone designation, traffic calming signs, etc.

As well, the Town commissioned a safety review, and it revealed issues that could not be adequately addressed.

In a March letter to STOPR, David Loveridge, director of public works for the Town, stated there had been a lack of meaningful input from the Town in the previous discussions about the bus service.

He also stated there were some safety issues that would be difficult or costly to implement changes to.

He pointed out traffic volumes don't exceed the design of the road, although there are a number of trucks carrying gravel and aggregate, and they would have a hard time stopping for pedestrians especially considering the steep hill heading in the valley.

Loveridge also observed the stretch between Hilltop Drive and the Trailway includes 1.5 metres of sidewalk and one metre of paved boulevard on either side.

"With numbers of students walking this route, there is the potential for students to encroach onto the travelled portion of the roadway, due to the limited separation between the sidewalk and the edge of the road," he wrote. "This creates a safety concern for students when considered in conjunction with the sight distance limitations and the relatively high volume of traffic and heavy trucks using Airport Road."

Local resident Adam Martin-Robbins has been leading the fight to keep the bus in place, and he addressed trustees Tuesday night, expressing appreciation for the new position taken by STOPR.

Brampton Trustee Steve Kavanagh observed that STOPR reported a year ago that the area was safe and that the Town had concurred with that.

"What's changed?" he asked, adding there are safety issues that the Town has essentially chosen to do nothing about.

Caledon Trustee Stan Cameron said STOPR had done a review about a year ago, and some staffer with the Town's public works department replied with seven words that basically said Airport Road was safe for pedestrians.

He also pointed out Caledon's mayor and staff had ordered the independent traffic study, which the Town paid for.

In putting forth his motion, Cameron stressed the Town has stated there are safety issues there. "That is one inescapable fact," he declared.

"It took seven words to take the bus off the route," Cameron observed, adding it took a lot of work by a lot of people to get the report to the board table.

Kavanagh liked the idea of getting the Town to pick up the tab for the service (Cameron later observed it would be about \$15,000 annually).

"I think we should bill them directly," Kavanagh declared. "Enough of this discussion. If they want the service, it's about time the Town of Caledon pays for it."

Brampton Trustee Beryl Ford wondered if the Town could be legally billed for this. Associate Director of Operational Support

Services Jaspal Gill said staff would look into that.

?I am very grateful to my colleagues,? Cameron commented after the vote, adding he was very impressed with the way a small community came together in the interest of the safety of kids.

?I'm elated,? Martin-Robbins said. ?We've known all along the road was unsafe.?