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Downtown Hub Trail to be realigned; Shoemaker wants spoke to James Street prioritized

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REFRESHING: Sisters Adeline and Anna enjoy a brisk but sunshiny walk along the John Rowswell Hub Trail at the waterfront near the Bush Plane Museum over the weekend. ALLANA PLAUNT/SAULT THIS WEEK jpg, SH

A portion of the John Rowswell Hub Trail will be re-aligned next summer.

City council approved a plan Monday that will see a portion of the downtown non-motorized trail proceed to the design and construction stage with the expectation that work on the trail that runs along Queen Street West adjacent to Esposito Park be completed in the spring and summer and the remainder of the project be discussed at the 2022 budget deliberations.

The re-alignment of this part of the 22.5 km Hub Trail is to create a safer and more intuitive route around the Machine Shop/Gateway site area.

Currently, the Hub Trail in the area uses on-road access for cyclists, and sidewalks for pedestrians and other trail users.

“The nature of the Bay Street and Huron Street intersection makes the trail experience confusing for users and can be daunting for less experienced cyclists,” said city planner Steve Turco in a report to council.

Two rerouting options were examined, with special attention paid to intersection crossings using traffic analyses, intersection capacity and delay assessments.

The best solution will see the new Hub Trail alignment using St. Mary’s River Drive, continuing north along Andrew Street, then west on Queen Street to John Street.

“This option would utilize a new, multi-use path within the boulevard, on the east sides of St. Mary’s River Drive and Andrew Street,” the report to council states.

The route will then continue on the south side of Queen Street to John Street and then utilize a controlled pedestrian crossing at Queen and John streets.

Turco says this rerouting option will create a more seamless transition into the Hub Trail and establish key connections to Esposito Park and Pump Track as well as the Kina Awiiya Secondary Program at the former Etienne Brule School site. It also avoids potential conflicts between Hub Trail users and bus manoeuvres adjacent to the future transit terminal.

The Mill Market, Machine Shop and tour train depot will still be connected by the existing waterfront walkway as a spoke of the Hub Trail. Signage will be developed to help guide trail users to the Canal District.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said he had hoped that a realignment would create a better connection between the downtown and the James Street neighbourhood.

Shoemaker wanted to know if that objective could also be met with the realignment project that is attempting to avoid the heavy traffic Huron Street area.

Turco said staff has investigated the option of having the trail run through the Machine Shop area but the challenge is that much of the land is still not developed and costs would be high to create

a safe environment with proper lighting and crossing Queen Street at Carmen's Way. The crossing of a rail line would also require approval from the rail owner and Transport Canada.

"It may be a challenge to increase the trail in that area," Turco said.

He said staff will continue to explore the area further in the Active Transportation Plan and the James Street connection area continues to be examined.

Shoemaker said he understands the purpose of the change but was hoping the available funding would better create the James Street area.

"It sounds like this isn't going to happen this time," Shoemaker said.

He told The Sault Star that while this realignment should be completed next, he plans on penning a motion for council hoping to identify the James Street spoke or connection as council's highest priority to add to the Hub Trail.

"We have passed a number of motions concerning James Street and I believe this is part of a series of motions to improve the situation of that neighbourhood and improve the connectiveness to the downtown," Shoemaker said.

Turco said the issue remains top of mind with the development of the Active Transportation Plan. The issue has also been identified in the James Street strategy and other initiatives being considered may have better alternatives to connect that neighbourhood.

"This is on staff's mind to find ways to connect the Hub Trail to the James Street area and into the downtown. There's a number of steps but there are a number of steps and further analysis that still needs to be done to best solidify how to do that," Turco told council.

Turco said the issue is definitely on staff's radar.

"We need to dive deep into the Active Transportation Master Plan and that will incorporate areas where we need improvement for pedestrian and cyclists and look at the challenging areas we have in our community for active transportation," Turco told The Sault Star. "There are a lot of challenges in that way including a fair bit of isolated lands, the rail yard and crossing Carmen's Way. There is no straightforward solution."

Shoemaker said that connection is a priority for him for future development.

The redevelopment of this portion of the Hub Trail is estimated to cost about \$326,000. About \$174,000 from other funding sources remains available to start the project, with the complete engineering design also covered in the costs, Turco said.

Council will decide during its 2022 budget deliberations whether it will fund the remaining costs for this project so that it can all be completed next spring and summer.

“This is a gap in our Hub Trail system and if completed it will address the overall experience for users. It would be nice to see it completely addressed but that’s a decision council will need to make and consider with its other priority items at budget time,” Turco said.

If city council chooses not to fund the remainder of the project in its 2022 budget, city staff will continue to look for future funding opportunities to complete this trail section.

In the meantime, the Hub Trail will also get a face lift on the north side of Mark Street, between Churchill Boulevard and Lake Street with the reconstruction of the roadway.

Turco said it is hoped that the trail will also be addressed from Mark Street to Hugill Street in the near future to continue to create a continuous trail path for users.

Shoemaker said the Hub Trail is viewed as one of the best recreational features in the city. It’s well used and he believes its expansion will only create more use for residents and visitors and help maintain healthy lifestyles.