

SAULT STE. MARIE

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Opinion: Preempting consultant report not the healthy thing to do

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The re-alignment of the part of the 22.5-kilometre John Rowsell Hub Trail, along Queen Street West adjacent to Esposito Park, is geared to create a safer and more intuitive route around the Machine Shop/Gateway site area. JEFFREY OUGLER

Should city council have preempted a consultant's report by identifying its highest priority for the expansion of the Hub Trail?

I think not.

And neither did Mayor Christian Provenzano and councillors Donna Hilsinger and Corey Gardi.

Why?

The City of Sault Ste. Marie spends thousands of taxpayer dollars on consultant reports, the majority of which are used as a blueprint and guide for city council in its future decisions on specific issues or development plans.

The Active Transportation Plan, a report commissioned by city council, is no different.

Active transportation is defined as an all-encompassing way to move from place to place. It includes all form of individual non-motorized transportation including walking, cycling, rollerblading, skiing and canoeing – and any other way to reduce the dependence on automobiles and increase recreational tourism opportunities.

Council gave the thumbs up in December to move forward with the \$137,000 plan, designed to take a holistic approach to integrate mobility and develop safe and convenient alternatives to vehicular transportation in and around Sault Ste. Marie. It's hoped the plan will help the city end the disconnects that exist with pedestrian and cycling networks, making active transportation smoother across the city. Increasing non-vehicular mobility choices, making it easier to move from destination to destination and linking recreational facilities and foster an active transportation culture are all goals of the study.

The study, led by WSP Canada Inc., is expected to get started in February and a target completion date has been set for September.

Implementation of any recommendations would likely come in stages, in conjunction with roadwork and other projects and as funding opportunities become available.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker has repeatedly advocated for better connections from the James Street neighbourhood to the downtown.

His resolution Monday, asking council to declare the Old West End and James Street area connection to be the highest priority for future spending on the Hub Trail is a continuation of that advocacy, and it's admirable. He's sticking to his strong belief that the neighbourhood needs to be better integrated with the rest of the community and was successful in getting the majority of his fellow councillors to buy in.

It's the timing of the resolution that makes it less than ideal.

As noted by the resolution's three opponents, declaring city council's highest priority could skew the consultant's final report and recommendations.

It must be remembered that when consultants are hired by the city, their role is to fill a specialty staff does not have. A consultant's role is also to provide nondiscriminatory advice based on their knowledge or expertise.

Even the mere 'hint' that this Hub Trail link is imperative to council, or residents, now has to be considered by the consultant – perhaps impacting the final recommendations or priority items in the hopes of pleasing those who are footing the bill for the study.

The perception would have been much better if the consultants had reached their own conclusions based on their study alone. That's not to say they won't come up with the same priority and if they don't, council always has the opportunity to ask the consultants for explanations on their report.

What's even more troublesome is that council's resolution, passed in an 8-3 vote, goes even further.

It directs staff to prepare a route for such a connection in anticipation of available funding. In other words, council wants the route to be shovel ready for potential funding opportunities that arise.

Again, on the surface, history shows that being 'shovel ready' is often the key to quicker or more successful funding applications, which in turn is better for the taxpayer.

But the resolution has to be considered in its entirety and the entire timing of it is poor.

While it is council's right to pass this resolution – either before or after the consultant's report is complete – the decision to do so now becomes a much more politicized decision, and one that wouldn't have hurt if it came a few months down the road.

In the meantime, we will wait for the results of the Active Transportation Plan and its findings. Lets see if the report and Shoemaker's resolution gel.

Elaine Della-Mattia is The Sault Star political reporter.