

South Algonquin discusses Airy Trestle rehabilitation process

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the South Algonquin Human Resources/Administration/Public Relations committee meeting on Aug. 25, the committee chaired by Councillor Sandra Collins, discussed the ongoing process of implementing a renovation strategy for the Airy Pedestrian Bridge, or Trestle. While the rehabilitation costs were larger than they had originally anticipated and they would have to use a percentage of the township's reserves to cover the overlay, the committee decided to recommend going ahead with the project to restore the trestle, pending another look at wood prices from the local lumber mills.

Collins began the discussion about the Airy Trestle by asking Dave Gatley, the public works superintendent, to provide an update on the current state of the impending renovation. He told the committee that the project was going to be more expensive than originally thought due to materials costs being higher and contractors being so busy and stretched pretty thin due to increased demand.

"This is not a project we analyzed heavily going in. We relied on the engineers' numbers and it didn't prove to be what we thought," he says.

Gatley had requested in his staff report that council authorize the use of up to \$100,000 from the township's reserves to complete the work on the trestle. He provided some background to the ongoing attempts to begin the renovation; the township had procured a \$100,000 grant from the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program: COVID-19 Resilience Infrastructure stream. The initial estimate of \$49,000 from the OSIM Inspection Report in 2019 turned out to be on the low side and a subsequent tender got in six bids ranging from \$223,739 to \$406,919. Staff worked with the engineer (Chris Bent from Jewell Engineering) to address this disparity by developing a revised scope of work on the trestle with the lowest bidder. McRae Lumber has also offered to supply untreated wood (hemlock) to the township at no cost. The low bidder resubmitted a price of \$140,595 to do the job, which would ultimately come to \$158,035 plus HST (factoring in the bidder's price, the \$11,940 engineering fees, the \$2,000 pressure treating cost and the \$3,500 contract administration cost. Gatley would provide site inspections with engineering support and he also recommended a 20 per cent contingency to accommodate the reduced scope of the project. The alternative, in Gatley's opinion would be to return the grant and postpone the project, only doing minimal repairs to the trestle to maintain the public's safety.

The Airy Trestle was last renovated back in the 1990's, and it used to be a train track. Councillor Bongo Bongo has said it is beloved by the entire community and believes that it makes Whitney truly unique.

Bryan Martin, the clerk and treasurer, said that he had spoken with the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry while Gatley was on vacation and they said that there was another CNR bridge that they were looking at doing some renovations on. When Martin suggested to them that they may not do the Airy Trestle due to the increased cost, they said they wouldn't redo their bridge if that was the case.

Councillor Bongo Bongo spoke next and thanked Gatley for the report, saying it was well put together. He said that he'd heard reports of ATVs going across the trestle and wondered if there was going to be a gate installed with the renovation to stop this from happening. Gatley replied that there was no plan for a gate but they have lots of large rocks to be placed strategically to prevent motorized access.

Bongo said that while using 5.7 per cent of reserves was hard to swallow, he fully understands how valuable a piece of infrastructure the trestle is and that it should be a priority to rehabilitate it.

Gatley interjected at that point, saying that he had had an out of date estimate due to outdated numbers, and that the withdrawal from reserves would be 3.7 per cent, not 5.7 per cent.

Councillor Dave Harper said he wasn't concerned with the renovation and that it was an excellent idea. The problem he had was with South Algonquin being fully responsible for the cost when Algonquin Park benefits from the trestle too, and that perhaps they should pay a portion of it.

?When dealing with reserves, I don't care if it's one per cent or 10 per cent. I don't like the idea of taking money out of reserves to fund projects. There's gotta be some way that we can get an agreement with Ontario Parks to fund this project,? he says.

With regard to an asset like the trestle, according to Bongo, the organization responsible for its maintenance would be its owner, and that would be South Algonquin Township. He also felt that opening up a dialogue with Ontario Parks would only serve to further delay and already overdue project.

He said he was in favour of going ahead with the rehabilitation and ?biting the bullet.?

Mayor Jane Dumas and Harper both agreed with Bongo that it was a valuable asset and that it should be repaired sooner rather than later.

Gatley informed the committee that the grant funds need to be spent by the fall of 2023, and Dumas remarked that if they don't go ahead with the renovation soon, they'll lose the grant.

Gatley said that they do have another year, so waiting may be worthwhile. He did note that they had a low bidder to do the work and a local lumber mill that was willing to donate the wood for the project.

?It may or may not be more expensive if we wait until next year. We could go back to the drawing board and go back to market options I suppose,? he says.

Bongo again reiterated that they should proceed and that delaying would be a mistake, a sentiment that Harper agreed with.

Councillor Richard Shalla questioned using hemlock in the trestle versus another wood like pine, as hemlock had proven to be less hardy than the pine when used during the last rehabilitation in the 1990s. He even suggested that even though the hemlock was being given free of charge, it might be worth paying a little extra to get pine for the project. Gatley agreed that the pine was sturdier, but he also thought that the hemlock originally used hadn't been pressure treated, as the hemlock to be used in the upcoming renovation would be.

Gatley said he had looked into the cost for other types of wood beside the hemlock, which would be provided free of charge by McRae Lumber, and would forward these figures to council for their consideration.

At Collins' urging, he said he would also approach one of the other wood mills in town, Murray Brothers, and see what they would possibly offer for the project and at what price point.

With no further discussion or questions on this matter, Collins moved the meeting onto other business.