

Tuesday October 11, 2022

In Council's meeting last week, it was pointed out that Council should be aware of the City's strategic priorities in discussion about the Airport Perimeter Trail and the Puckett's Gulch rezoning.

I decided to read the [Strategic Priorities 2022-2024](#) to see what it advised in this situation, whether it would be out of line for Council to recommend to administration that it should incorporate a broader land swap for the land the Airport wants at Puckett's Gulch. Jim Gilpin presented Council with a good surveying overview of a solution that could easily work for problem spots along the fence.

Page 2, the Introduction points out "...Council is here to listen and learn from community members to ensure a bright future." This helps me, as an individual citizen, feel OK about pursuing this topic. As a walking advocate, I feel a certain stress in pursuing topics without having a large non-profit group at my beck and call to write letters and make phone calls, apply for grants and so on.

- The reality is there's no easy way to lump in all walkers into a single organization. Yet this is what I try to do as a walking advocate: I see the need for sidewalk clearing in winter; switchback repairs in a few spots around the city; connector trails around the hospital to give workers loop walks they can do on their breaks, all staying close in case of emergency calls; crosswalks that allow people more than a few seconds to cross; sidewalks with head-height signs in the middle of them; streets that need traffic calming; trails such as at Bert Law Park that could be a great accessible trail; and fences that needlessly block walking.
- This is why I believe that both the City and YG need a senior staff member to look at City situations as a walking advocate. This person would have raised a red flag last December when YG's initial airport survey didn't acknowledge our trails in the area along the proposed runway expansion.

Page 3's graph, Looking to the future, suggests that by 2040, Whitehorse could have a population of 45,500. ([Aug, 2022, Bureau of Stats](#), Whitehorse area: 34,467). Obviously, the City needs to optimize its efforts, what it spends money and time on. I use City here referring to the partnership between Council and administration.

Page 6 on Whitehorse's Financial Position goes on to agree about efficiency, saying "*Council provides strategic oversight to the organization and ensures that the corporation is fiscally responsible.*" Are we better to spend a small incremental cost now by tacking on Jim Gilpin's land swap concept, or wait a few years until the land swap is formally needed and a major intergovernmental process is required, all at City expense?

Page 6 on Reserves says "*recognizing the importance of asset management when ensuring the future of the corporation.*" During the public processes creating the **2018 Downtown Plan**, one of the senior outside consultants pointed out to me that we should be aware of the economic value of recreational land and trails.

- The City has a trail, an asset, that has eroded to a small path beside a steep drop. The Airport's perimeter road, periodically used for passage of heavy equipment such as fire trucks, goes right beside this eroded edge. They are currently moving the road slightly away from the fence. Has it been moved far enough? Likely we won't ever know whether airport activity close to the edge here, contrary to what the 1959 [NRC Whitehorse Escarpment](#) report recommended, has affected the value of this City land and trail asset.

Page 8 says Council "*aims to focus on the following key themes*"...

- On housing needs, it talks about "*Difficulty attracting workers to Whitehorse.*" Downtown has long been the neighbourhood many people first live in when moving to Whitehorse. The ability to live Downtown without a vehicle is a big plus. One example: service industry workers are always needed. Wages can be low. Walking is always a free activity. With a recreational escarpment trail, open past Drury Street, Downtown can look like a pretty cool place to live.
- It says "*we value the history, culture, opportunities, and partnerships that we share with Indigenous Peoples.*" Since OCP (8.35) points out that Downtown needs more special places, a linear upper escarpment nature park is an attainable goal. Given the likelihood that First Nations have always been walking this trail, this would clearly be a fascinating central storyline in the narrative around this park and its great view scapes.

- It says "*Community public safety can be enhanced through partnerships, advocacy, policy/bylaw changes, and improvements to existing prevention plans.*" While not an official trail, the perimeter trail is well used and Council could help us to make using it safer by helping us get the fence moved.
- On adapting to climate change, it says "*Whitehorse must continue to reduce and adapt.*" Long before the City recognized that Climate Change was happening, the path above Drury Street was eroding. The 2022 spring landslides were not a new concept as slides have long been a feature of the escarpments, especially in the area above downtown and the river. However, changes such as increased winter precipitation call out for increased attention to major activities near the escarpment edge, suggesting that our escarpment trail must remain strictly non-motorized.
- referring to Service excellence, and Council's advocacy for "*...exceptional performance in all aspects of the City's delivery of essential and support services*" it says "*...many opportunities to create sport, recreation, and tourism expansion to meet the community's expectations*". This tells me that Council supporting this walking initiative is well within reason. Also, most tourists love to walk, a definite plus here.

Page 9 talks more specifically about 2022-2024 strategic priorities, in particular around housing and development "*Review opportunities to enhance the downtown core reflecting its place as the centre of our Capital City.*" Being open and having great views, the perimeter trail is often used by non-downtown residents. It feels safe. With some trail planning, living downtown and close natural recreational walking need not be a challenge. Creating a downtown trail plan would help the concept of neighbourhood trail equity.

It goes on to say "*Explore new and innovative approaches to land development, [and] Evaluate opportunities to purchase and develop property*". Working with the Yukon Government in the minor land swap needed along the perimeter trail should be a win win situation— both motivated to help the public and minimize costs. It could conceivably happen with few problems. Airport representatives at the initial Council presentation for this By-law pointed out that this project was well funded, and very desired by the Yukon Government.

Last on page 9, speaking a "*strong and meaningful relationships with Yukon First Nations & community members*", the document says "*Enhance civic engagement, communication, collaboration and consultation.*" Many First Nations people live Downtown and continue the tradition of walking escarpment trails.

Page 10 talks of Inclusivity, Accessibility and Diversity, saying "*Improve City services to support aging in place, Review accessibility policy and standards, and Increase accessibility for all*". In Whitehorse, there are very few places with a wild natural setting where a person can go in a wheelchair. Making the Airport Perimeter Trail a crushed gravel path instead of paving will not only make it more friendly to seniors and those with joint issues, it will encourage that more of this path be made accessible in the future. Being able to go past Drury Street to the area overlooking the river will be a real municipal coup.

Page 10 talks about Community safety and "*Develop community safety improvements (in conjunction with partner government agencies, where applicable)*". Moving Airport operations farther back from the escarpment edges would definitely make sense.

It also says "*Improve active transportation opportunities and infrastructure*". Given that the City's Bicycle Network Plan uses the Airport Perimeter Trail, this surely fits the community goal of moving the fence over.

Page 11 refers to Service excellence and fiscal responsibility, specifically "*Evaluate traffic congestion along key transportation routes*". We want a walkable Downtown with a strong mix of business and homes. If we don't want Downtown characterized by inexpensive parking lots serviced by high volume freeways, we need to offer desirable alternatives, especially for the new City South Growth Area. This airport fence situation discourages any aspect of thinking that active transportation could be much more than going alongside paved 4-lane roads, a very unattractive offering to encourage people to participate in active transportation.

Page 12, Further Steps says "*We understand many of these priorities are longer-term, but we are committed to pursuing them now to build the base for future success.*" This seems to sum up quite nicely, that to deal with the land swap now, get the fence moved and then when Parks and Recreation and the community come to some agreement, undergo whatever steps are appropriate in getting this trail considered an official trail and whatever status is felt appropriate under the OCP special places for Downtown process.

Peter

