

Region eyes improved network of bike paths; Plan is to service tourists as well as local residents better

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Niagara's waterways, parks and scenic roads are tailor-made for a bikeways system that would be the envy of many communities.

By improving that network of paths, transportation links, recreational offerings, public health and attractiveness to tourists all stand to benefit.

To that end, representatives of the Regional Niagara bicycling committee met Wednesday at the Region's planning and public works committee to discuss future plans.

In his presentation in council chambers, Pelham regional councillor and bike committee chairman Brian Baty spoke about the benefits of a robust path system and outlined his committee's strategic priorities.

One is to have the bike committee help implement council's already-approved regional bikeways network to ensure space is dedicated to cyclists.

The second priority would see the committee help Niagara municipalities and other stakeholders develop transportation policies and plans to support bike-friendly infrastructure.

That work includes more interconnected pathways and bike storage and parking facilities.

Finally, the committee will boost partnerships with other groups and communities to improve cycling opportunities and promote the activity.

The planning and public works committee recommended approval of those three priorities unanimously Wednesday, with council set to vote on its approval next week.

Two other recommendations presented by the bike committee are an "organizational structure" to advance transportation issues and the creation of a full-time "sustainable transportation coordinator" position.

Both were referred to Niagara Region staff for a report that takes into account the "joint mandate" of the Greater Niagara Circle Route and the Region's bike committee.

That report will then be sent to the Region's transportation strategy steering committee for further discussion.

"The core of Wednesday's presentation is to ultimately get council's agreement on what this bike committee should do," bike committee member and regional senior planner Ken Forgeron said after the meeting.

"(Assuming council's approval) the question will be, 'Now, how do we go about achieving our three priorities?'" Forgeron said.

"And do we need a sustainable transportation co-ordinator or some organizational structure to help deal with all this? That's something we still have to work out."

"Not only do we want to serve tourists by doing all this," Forgeron added, "we want the everyday person to be able to use their bicycle for daily duties and get healthier at the same time, while improving our air quality."