

## Boulter Road bridge to be closed



By Bill Kilpatrick

At the Jan. 15 meeting of Hastings Highlands council, Denver Mayhew, the operations manager for Hastings Highlands, presented council with a proposal to close the Boulter Road bridge, realign the intersection with Old Highway 62, and upgrade the sideroad. According to Mayhew's report the recommendation came after a mandated bi-annual Ontario Structural Inspection Manual inspection by the Ainsly Group in October of 2023 that identified Boulter Road Bridge "as needing replacement within the near term of one to five years" at an estimated cost of approximately \$1,088,500. While the report appeared to give the municipality until 2028 to fix the bridge, Hastings Highlands' CAO David Sewart, said in an email that, "The 2023 OSIM report demonstrated what we believe to be an increase in risk and liability for structural failure. As a result, our team is being proactive and prioritizing this bridge to mitigate against any unplanned unbudgeted emergency that could significantly impact public health and safety as well as cost."

The agenda report went on to further point out that "Given current budget limitations, municipal staff have explored alternative solutions to a full bridge replacement." The report stated that municipal staff explored "the installation of a multi-plate culvert as an alternative option as well," adding that "the preliminary environmental impact assessment of that option was not favourable and would make the installation of culverts complicated and expensive due to required approvals." Councillor Roger Davis questioned Mayhew about this option during the meeting and Mayhew responded that "the multi-plate culverts are an extreme cost as well, which has to come with an engineer to put them together and we'll need outside help because we can't do that in-house. We'll need that contracted out and the cost of that is more than the cost to rehabilitate the road at Old 62 and close the bridge."

While the report did not give exact numbers outlining the multi-plate culvert option it did give the estimated cost savings of closing the bridge. The report stated, "By pursuing the alternative of closing the bridge, realigning the intersection with Old Hwy 62, and upgrading the sideroad, the municipality can reduce costs to an estimated \$500,000, providing immediate savings. This solution also eliminates the ongoing maintenance costs associated with the bridge structure."

The response from council to Mayhew's report was mixed. Councillor Nancy Matheson was for the closing of the bridge and gave a "huge shout out of appreciation to staff" for finding "a less costly solution" due to budget restrictions. Councillor Keith Buck, who was also in favour of the closing of the bridge stated, "A big thank you to Denver and his team. It just makes sense. It saves a boat load of money."

Deputy mayor Tammy Davis and Councillor Tracy Hagar were not as enthusiastic about staff's proposed for closing of the bridge. Davis stated, "Before I came [to the meeting] I did the [traffic re-routing] tour [around the bridge] and I would encourage all of you to do the tour as well to see the actual impact of this decision, because I don't believe for one second that it's a good one." Davis then cited the report that stated 200 people use that road per day. She asked Mayhew for clarification on that number and he confirmed that the traffic count data that was completed in July/Aug. of 2024 showed 200 vehicles per day. Davis also pointed out that the municipality would still have to plow the road right up to the bridge as there is a resident that lives right there, adding that "the impact to the people who are just on the other side [of the bridge] is significant and I really think it's worth reconsideration." Hagar said that she was "very hesitant about closing the bridge off completely" adding "I'm not prepared to pass this one at this time without more information."

Regarding the vehicle count Councillor Buck asked Mayhew what the off-season vehicle count might be. Mayhew responded "It would certainly be a lower vehicle count." Mayhew estimated that the number of vehicles might be closer to 100 per day.

Mayor Tony Fitzgerald said that the bridge closure decision had two components to it "financial" and the "efficient running of the roads." He went on to say that "This is a very small bridge costing us over \$1 million. If this is an option that we can go around by fixing up Old Highway 62 and bringing it up to the level of the rest of that road [then we should]. [And] not to belittle the inconvenience to some people, there's no doubt about that, I'm not going to pretend that's not real and it would not be my first choice [especially] for the people living closest to it [the bridge] [where it's] the most inconvenient, "but we have to be able to pay for what we do and it's the bottom line. This isn't the best option. If we had a million dollars, [that would be best] but when you don't have a million dollars this is the best option I'm afraid."

Council then voted in favour of the Boulter Road bridge closure with councillor Hagar and deputy mayor Davis voting against the proposal.

In terms of the impact on local residents, not only will they have to be rerouted 1.5 kilometers, but there was also an administrative portion to the proposal. The administrative portion would require a renaming of the 400 metres of road north of the closed bridge affecting two property addresses, and the eight properties south of the bridges would need new 911 addresses.

Bancroft This Week spoke to Boulter Road resident Ruth Tremblay who said that she along with many other will be negatively impacted by the bridge's closure. Tremblay raised concerns around the response time for emergency vehicles, pointing out that the proposed rerouting of traffic will add an additional 15 minutes to her commute each way. "My biggest concern" said Tremblay "was the emergency response time. If I need an ambulance or if anyone along here needs an ambulance that's an extra 15-minute response time." Bancroft This Week reached out to Carl Bowker, the chief of emergency services for Hastings County for a comment on how the bridge closure would impact emergency services, but he did not return our email by press time.

Hastings Highlands fire chief Bryce Robinson was asked if the rerouting would potentially impact fire response times or evacuations in the event of a forest fire. Robinson responded that he sees "no issues with evacuation in the event of a large forest fire, the bridge closure will not hinder evacuation?" In terms of fire response times Robinson estimated that the bridge closure would add one to two minutes depending on road conditions.

Tremblay also raised other concerns that involved two school bus routes and the extra time that would be added for children on that route. She estimated it would be an extra 20-30 minutes with the bridge closure. She spoke about the potential impact on tourism, along with the impact on the residents other than the 10 that live near the bridge, as well as residents from surrounding municipalities who will be impacted by the bridge's closure. "I don't think they are aware of how many people this is impacting?" she said. She also disputed the estimation by Mayhew that only 100 vehicles use Boulter Road per day in the off season. "No way?" she said, "I live on Boulter Road and there is constant traffic." Tremblay cited all of the extra vehicles that travel on Boulter Road during hunting season, and for winter enthusiasts such as snowmobilers etcetera.

Tremblay has decided to start a petition to attempt to get the municipality to reconsider its decision to close the bridge. She met with CAO Stewart and inquired about debt financing for the bridge repairs. Stewart told her that the municipality could borrow money to fix the bridge, but that council has decided otherwise. In an email response Stewart said the municipality was "... able to use debt to service investments into municipal infrastructure?" adding that "Hastings Highland's council wished to continue to maintain and invest into the pay-as-you-go principle as per their recently updated strategic plan."

Tremblay also feels that there needs to be more public input before the bridge is closed and work begins on rerouting traffic. "Why don't we have an evening meeting about the bridge and see who shows up?" suggested Tremblay.

The agenda report outlined the next steps that will be taken now that the proposal has been approved. Those steps include: the development of timelines for project components to be completed, the preparation of applicable tender documents, a bylaw to be approved by council to permanently close Boulter Road bridge with appropriate public notice, the installation of signage for public notice, coordinating with Hastings County to readdress impacted properties and rename roads as required, and the final step which is to "formally close bridge including appropriate barriers and new signage installed as required." When asked about a timeline regarding when the by law would be brought before council, CAO David Stewart said, "We anticipate that it will be after construction season once the Boulter Road and Old Highway 62 road realignment is complete."