

Council axes Sauble parking fee

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By Rob Gowan

Decision not final until budget approved

South Bruce Peninsula has voted to eliminate paid parking at Sauble Beach.

Town council passed a motion during budget deliberations Tuesday morning to drop the fee to park at the beach, which was \$15 a day in 2013. The decision isn't final until council passes a final budget, currently scheduled to take place on Dec. 17.

"I have always been against paid parking for several reasons. I have yet to meet anybody who enjoys putting money into a parking meter," said Mayor John Close. "More importantly, the beach is our community's park. We don't have green spaces throughout our subdivisions in our community and we are sort of penalizing our own public."

In the recorded vote, Close and councillors Karen Klages, Marilyn Bowman and Jim Turner voted to eliminate paid parking. Councillors Janice Jackson, Matt Standen and Paul McKenzie voted against. Councillors Jay Kirkland and Chris Thomas were absent.

Bowman said she was in favour of either keeping the rate where it was or eliminating it and moved the motion to drop the fee. She wasn't in favour of rolling the fee back to \$5 a day because she felt the best the town could do was break even under that scenario.

"I believe there is a lot of people who are not using the beach and I believe that with a healthy lifestyle that's important for them to get out there and get their family out, but \$15 was an oppressive amount of money for them to pay," said Bowman.

Close said residents made it clear over the past six months they were not happy having to pay to park at the beach. The Sauble Beach Chamber of Commerce has been pressing the town since the spring to reduce the daily parking rate to \$5. The chamber has presented figures it says show a direct relation between parking costs and a decrease in the number of vehicles paying to park at the beach. Chamber representatives have said tourist numbers are way down and blame paid parking for being part of the problem.

Jackson said Tuesday the beach costs about \$300,000 each year to maintain and that money has to come from somewhere. She wanted to give residents of the municipality a parking pass. She also said the majority of people didn't support a reduction in the parking fee and that she doesn't feel paid parking is to blame for the reduction in the number of tourists.

"I just think it is an absolutely ridiculous, incomprehensible move that this council has made and I think it is an incredible injustice to the people of this municipality," Jackson said. "It costs a lot of money to maintain that beach and it is not . . . our own residents that is creating the need for all of this maintenance."

With the move, council's original target of no tax increase in 2014 looks unlikely. While it wasn't known Tuesday what the impact eliminating paid parking would have on the budget, in 2013 parking fees at Sauble generated just under \$180,000 in revenue.

Another budget session is scheduled for Dec. 10 at 9 a.m.

Jackson said she believed the tax increase from the parking decision would be at least 2%. Michael Humble, the town's manager of financial services, said it would take about a day to figure out what the impact would be because parking costs are scattered throughout so many different areas of the budget.

"I will vote down the budget as a result of it," said Jackson. "I can't support the budget overall and I think people will understand."

Bev Buckton, of the chamber of commerce's paid parking committee, said he was stunned but pleasantly surprised by council's decision.

"As I said all along I thought we made a good case and I thought the facts spoke for themselves," said Buckton. "We were prepared for a compromise solution and I am surprised with the outright elimination, but we will welcome the tourists back with open arms."

Buckton said the chamber will be promoting the elimination of parking fees heavily in its advertising and promotional materials.

"We will be letting people know Sauble Beach is back open for business," Buckton said.