

Town not committing to airport repairs

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By Rob Gowan

South Bruce Peninsula is taking a wait and see approach to how it proceeds with proposed upgrades at the Wiarton-Keppel International Airport.

At a budget meeting on Tuesday, council decided against committing any funds to the airport in its 2014 budget while it awaits word on other funding sources and a business plan being worked on by the airport's management board.

"If you are going to put money into it and debenture it, you better have a business plan and we don't have a business plan," said Mayor John Close. "We are looking at what comes first, the money or the runway. I think this council wants to see a little bit more sauce on the pudding before we make a decision worth that kind of millions."

Council has been provided with a rough costing for upgrades at the airport of between \$3 million and \$6 million. South Bruce Peninsula had planned on debenturing its portion of the costs over 15 years, if it decides to proceed with any work. Both Georgian Bluffs and South Bruce Peninsula have also agreed to explore some avenues for funding the repairs, including a federal grant program and the Southwestern Ontario Development Fund.

"That kind of value of \$3 million or \$6 million, we don't have at this time the ambition to put money into that without hearing of any grants or any other monies coming in," said Close.

The airport, which is owned by Georgian Bluffs and South Bruce Peninsula, is in need of upgrades to its runway and approach lighting with Transport Canada indicating it would pull the airport's certification if the required work is not completed.

An inspection in the summer by Transport Canada found the main runway at the airport had deteriorated to the point where it needed to be replaced. The 5,000-foot-long, 150-foot-wide strip has had some repair work done in the past but is about twice its 15-year life expectancy.

The board which manages the airport has submitted a corrective action plan to Transport Canada containing information on how it plans to proceed with the repairs.

On Tuesday, South Bruce Peninsula council held some debate about what position it wanted to take on funding the airport upgrades, but then proceeded into closed session where, upgrades this year.

Coun. Janice Jackson described the airport as a never-ending money pit and expressed concerns about spending so much money on a facility that has consistently lost money.

"That is an awful lot to ask of people for something we are already losing money on year after year after year," Jackson said.

The airport was one of several issues discussed at council on Tuesday as part of its expansion requests list, which includes items that have been brought up over the course of the year.

Among the other decisions council made on the expansion list items included:

- Eliminating paid parking at Sauble Beach, which generated just under \$180,000 in revenue

in 2013.

- Committing \$50,000 to the public works department for additional staff. The money is to be moved from funds allocated for the purchase of a street sweeper.
- Deferring DNA testing of the beach seeps at Sauble Beach, expected to cost \$10,000, until the 2015 budget.
- Not proceeding with an organic waste green bin program estimated to cost just under \$350,000.

Council still has to decide on how it wants to proceed with a request for funding from Grey Bruce Health Services for upgrades to its cancer and heart treatment equipment and facilities. GBHS has asked for \$60,000 in each of the next five years.

On Tuesday council scheduled an additional council meeting for Dec. 10 at 9 a.m. Its current schedule has it approving its final budget at a meeting on Dec. 17.