

COUNTY NEARS AGREEMENT WITH PEEL REGION OVER WINSTON CHURCHILL COSTS

by David Meyer

GUELPH -Some time early in the new year Wellington County and Peel Region will announce a settlement over payment for Winston Churchill Boulevard.

Talks have been ongoing between those two governments and a number of other parties. The county spent \$3.1-million in 2007 to repair that road and a bridge on it, and billed half the cost to the Region of Peel, as per their municipal agreement of shared costs for boundary roads.

Peel officials paid Wellington County some of that cost. Then, Peel council heard from a citizen there about an agreement from the 1970s for two gravel pits to help pay for road work. That council then began wondering if it should have paid anything at all.

That left Wellington County waiting for about \$1.2-million from Peel Region.

County Warden Joanne Ross-Zuj said in an interview on Monday she and Peel Regional Chairman Emil Kolb have met numerous times over the past year to attempt to untangle all the issues.

The complications go all the way back to an Ontario Municipal Board zoning decision in 1978 for two gravel pit operators. Those pit owners agreed to help maintain the road as part of the conditions for their pit licences from the Ministry of Natural Resources.

The two companies that made the agreement in return for the pit licences were Premier Gravel and Telephone City Gravel, of Brantford. They subsequently sold the pits, leaving the two new pit owners, Dufferin Aggregates and James Dick, wondering if the conditions were still attached to the licence.

Complicating the matter even further, the road at that time belonged to Erin township and to Peel Region. The township disappeared ten years ago when it merged with Erin village.

Erin Mayor Rod Finnie found the agreement in some old records, but Ross-Zuj noted the new town took no action.

"Peel will be paying their bill to the county," Ross-Zuj said. "We've fully investigated ... We reached an agreement about who is responsible for what."

She said when she became county warden, all those involved had agreed to meet and discuss the issue, but county councillors began receiving complaints from Guelph resident Bill Manderson that there was a "debacle" and the county was in jeopardy of losing several million dollars over the road.

Ross-Zuj said a resident in Peel took Manderson's charges to Peel Regional council, which halted the remaining payment until those charges could be investigated. That took a year of meetings with staff and government officials as well as the pit owners and ministry officials.

Ross-Zuj said they conducted a thorough investigation. She said Peel and Wellington officials agreed it would not be worth a court case to chase two new companies over the old agreement because the costs would be prohibitive.

"It was not going to be a conclusive outcome through long legal battles," she said.

Ross-Zuj said a court battle would leave everyone "with no positive outcome and cost us money. We sorted it all out."

She added, "There was no wrongdoing."

She said there was full cooperation from both current gravel pit operators, and that the MNR had suggested all along that it would prefer to see no litigation between the two governments and the pit operators. The issue is "very close to completion."

And, she added, there is good relations with the county's neighbour. "When Peel builds the other half [of Winston Churchill Boulevard] we will be partners in that one."

On boundary roads, each municipality pays a share of construction and maintenance costs.