

Aurora continues push for St. John's interchange

By Brock Weir

Aurora Council has renewed the push for a highway interchange at St. John's Sideroad.

With the Region of York set to begin talks on their capital budget later this month, Councillor Michael Thompson underscored his drive for a connection to Highway 404 at last week's Council meeting.

Councillor Thompson cited an email circulated by Municipal Staff regarding a report from the Region on their 10-year construction update. Information on the proposed interchange was scant, he said, and looked to Mayor Geoff Dawe, Aurora's representative on Regional Council for answers.

Mayor Dawe informed Council that if anything is to progress it has to be put back into the 2016 Regional Capital Budget this year.

It is the latest step in Council advocating for an interchange on St. John's Sideroad to alleviate traffic pressure at the Wellington Street interchange and resulting traffic within subdivisions as commuters race to get a head-start on their trips to the city.

This is a problem that will only be exacerbated once the thousands of new homes in Aurora's 2C development are complete and the time to get going with the interchange is now, according to Council.

Council last tackled this issue in September after municipal staff said progress with 2C's nearly 3,000 new units, which will bring in over 8,000 new residents to Aurora, is progressing at a faster-than-anticipated clip.

"Development of 2C is proceeding at a faster pace than staff initially anticipated," said Mr. Ramunno. "Based on Aurora's recent history in the 2B planning area and more recent market demand across York Region, it was anticipated that growth in 2C would occur over a period of five to eight years. At the current pace, the bulk of 2C will be developed before this, likely within four years.

"Pace of growth is determined by strong demand for ground-related housing. As evidenced by long lines at sales construction trailers upon the release of each phase of development to date, demand has been quite strong. Once approvals and servicing are in place, it is the builder's prerogative to sell and build units at whichever pace they see fit."

Accommodations, however, will still need to be made to account for the influx of new Aurora residents, particularly in the Leslie Street and St. John's Sideroad area, Mr. Ramunno noted. The Region of York is currently planning on widening Leslie Street through its leg in north Aurora (the border with Newmarket to St. John's Sideroad) beginning in the Spring of 2016, lasting for an estimated year, with the balance to Wellington to be complete by the Summer of 2018.

The St. John's and Highway 404 interchange remains on the books at the Regional level, but not until 2021.

This is an issue that has rankled Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillors since the 2014 municipal election. While Mayor Dawe has voiced these concerns around the Regional Council table, Councillors said at the time it is time to step up efforts to bring this forward well before 2021.

"I think it is important to show to the residents that we continue to advocate for improvements along the 404 because, as we all know, traffic congestion keeps getting worse and worse and so we need to start working on them today to begin to relieve that pressure," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "Part of the issue is it is not even on a 10 year horizon plan. They have pushed it out and now is the time to bring it to the forefront."

This was a view shared by Councillor Sandra Humfries, who said she has heard from several residents asking Council to make this a "priority."

A decision on an interchange is not the Region's alone. The Province of Ontario also has a say and Mayor Dawe told Council he lets no opportunity to advocate for the interchange pass by, including a meeting with Minister of Transportation, Steven Del Duca, as recently as August.

Mayor Dawe suggested a formal motion from Council would make Aurora's request to the Region have more 'oomph', but Councillor Paul Pirri expressed a degree of surprise the interchange hasn't already been made a priority with Wayne Emerson, former mayor of Whitchurch-Stouffville, a town that would also directly benefit from such an interchange, now sitting in the Regional Chair.

'It is important to him and quite frankly it is a juggling act of the many, many projects they have going,' said Mayor Dawe. 'There is a little bit of horse trading that has to go on sometimes, quite frankly.'