

Aurora renews push for St. John's, 404 interchange

By Brock Weir

The pressure is on to have the Region and Province take action on building an interchange with Highway 404 at St. John's Sideroad. Council renewed the calls at last week's General Committee meeting, voting to increase pressure on Newmarket-Aurora MPP, Ontario's Ministry of Transportation and the Region of York to move up the timelines on what they said was a much-needed valve to alleviate road congestion on Aurora's east side.

The move came after Council members reviewed a report on road projects the Region plans on carrying out within Aurora over the next 10 years.

The report by Anca Mihail, Manager of Engineering and Capital Delivery, notes that the Region is currently working with Metrolinx, the arm's length provincial body governing GO Transit, on the previously proposed grade separation on Wellington Street which will see traffic diverted under the train tracks near the GO Station to allow for all-day two-way GO train service, but this project will not include road widening.

The report also noted, however, that the long-proposed 404 and St. John's Interchange is currently not in the Region's 10 year plan, which raised many questions around the Council table.

First out of the gate was Councillor Tom Mrakas who asked Mayor Geoff Dawe, Aurora's representative at the Regional table, how he voted on the 10 year plan.

In response, Mayor Dawe said he voted in favour of the interchange issue coming back to Regional Council's attention this quarter. "The interchange has been and continues to be identified in the Master Plan," said Mayor Dawe. "Interchanges are under provincial jurisdiction. It was first identified in the 2002 Regional Transportation Master Plan with the timing of 2021. The 2009 Transportation Master Plan (TMP) moved that timing up to 2031, the 2016 TMP moved it up to a range of 2027-203 and actually backed that up a bit. We continue to advocate for it. As a matter of fact, the interchange is coming back to the Region in March or April [along with] some other projects to go back into the budgetary 10 year Capital Plan and it was put in as an option with the full proviso that it was coming back."

With this option coming back to the table this spring, Council members said it is time to strike while the iron is hot.

"As someone who frequently uses the 404 and sees congestion both on the way in the morning as well as the evening, I can't stress enough how much that is needed sooner rather than later," said Councillor Michael Thompson. "As we all know, costs continue to escalate and it is better to look at doing it now than waiting and seeing the costs rise, especially if I continue to hear the 404 is being widened at some point. Just do it at the same time."

"I think some of us share the opinion it is unfortunate it was not included when St. John's was widened, so maybe there was an opportunity to do it then. It just would have seemed to be common sense."

While future widening of the 404 might be an opportunity, Councillor Mrakas said in a meeting he had recently with the Minister of Transportation, that the appetite is there, but it is a matter of the Town and the Region speaking up.

"She and the Director of Provincial Highways mentioned they have not had conversations with Aurora Town Staff since 2013, I believe," he said. "I understand that maybe it was, at that time, pushed off by saying the Region is dealing with this and we don't necessarily need to get involved. I believe we do need to get involved. Some of the conversations that were going around the table is they would like to hear from us, from the Town, because they are not understanding how urgent and how much of a need it is." Detailed design work on widening the 404 from Stouffville Road to Green Lane is yet to be done, he added, so this would be an ideal time as they are open to adding it in.

With this, Councillor Thompson made a motion to ramp up the pressure to those who can advocate for the interchange.

"It is in the Region's purview, but at the end of the day the Province is saying it would be a little helpful if you guys wrote to us and expressed your need," he said. "Let's do that and be proactive. Hopefully that also helps with the Region and put a little pressure on them."