

GTA West Corridor gets thumbs-down from Council

A formal objection to the Province's plan for the GTA West Corridor ? the proposed Highway 413 ? may have fizzled around the Regional Council table, but Aurora lawmakers have joined the ranks of Caledon and Brampton in requesting the project be put on hold pending a Federal assessment.

Last Tuesday, Council unanimously approved a motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner calling for just that, citing the potential impacts the highway proposal ? which, if brought to fruition, would cut through large swaths of Peel Region in to the City of Vaughan ? could have on the environment.

?The proposed GTA West Transportation Corridor, Highway 413, originated as a component of the 2005 Places to Grow Act that set out population, density and growth targets for municipalities, while aiming to direct growth away from agricultural and environmentally sensitive lands,? said Councillor Gaertner in her motion. ?The proposed highway will pave over 2,000 hectares of land, including important agricultural and environmental lands contrary to the mandate of that Act.?

She further noted that an omnibus bill passed last July by the Province, Bill 197, removed ?many environmental regulations and opened a ?streamlined' environmental assessment process, skipping over parts of Ontario's assessment system and removing the requirement for a comprehensive environmental assessment.?

Prior to Councillor Gaertner's motion, a similar effort was made by King Township Mayor Steve Pellegrini to have Regional Council withdraw its support for the 413. This, according to Mayor Tom Mrakas, fell on vote of 8 ? 13. Although a formal withdrawal was rejected, the Region went a step further to request a Federal Impact Assessment.

?An environmental assessment is definitely needed,? said Councillor Rachel Gilliland in support of Councillor Gaertner's motion. ?This is an important message to send to the Province and also the Federal government as well of where we stand, showing our support and where we want the work to be done to make sure that when and if the highway is constructed it is done with the right intentions for our environment and our climate.?

Councillor Harold Kim said he agreed, stating it was important for municipalities like Aurora, particularly as part of York Region, to ?lend our voice? to the cause.

?I recall Highway 413 being brought up in the early 2000s and part of the Places to Grow Act,? he said. ?I think way back in 2012? a panel came out and they viewed that essentially the Regional objective was to have an alternative way to get from east to west in the GTA, while this highway in the northern extremes of the GTA? and really the amount of time that it saved was 30 seconds. In terms of this impact investigation or report, they will certainly hopefully highlight that and certainly if it does happen, it will encourage and instigate more car-dependent housing and that is certainly a concern as well.?

Mayor Mrakas also shared the view that requesting a Federal Impact Assessment was important moving forward.

?Quite frankly, the Provincial Environmental Impact Assessment has been streamlined [and] I am a bit nervous that things are going to get missed at the Provincial level because of that streamlined process. We have seen what the Province has done with regards to making changes to zoning [and] have seen what that has caused in certain circumstances, so I think that is why it is passed right across the Board. We have seen Vaughan withdraw their support from a local level. I think it is vitally important to stand up with our local municipalities, our neighbouring municipalities, and stand for what they believe in.

?This is not directly [cutting] through Aurora, our neighbouring municipalities have stood up and said that we are opposed to this and we want a federal impact assessment. I think this is a good way for us to show our partnership with our neighbouring municipalities to say, ?We'll stand with you on an important issue.'?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter