

Active Transportation Plan could bring nearly 200km of new routes, trails to Aurora

Aurora's new Active Transportation Master Plan could bring nearly 200km of new routes to the municipal trails system.

The draft Master Plan was presented to Council last week at the Town's first Committee of the Whole meeting on March 5.

The Plan is intended to guide the development of active transportation networks ? such as trails and bike lanes ? for the next 20 years.

The Master Plan has been in the works since 2021 with consultants WSP Canada and has been guided by six key pillars: Provide and Support a Variety of Transportation Options; Support Community Health; Improve Connectivity; Increase Sustainability; Prioritize Safety and Accessibility; and Coordinate with Existing and Future Infrastructure Projects.

The draft plan also looked at socio-economic trends to help ?develop an understanding? of the current and future needs of Aurora residents.

?Approximately 60 per cent of Aurora's population commuted to work, with 22 per cent spending under 15 minutes and 21 per cent spending 15 to 29 minutes on their commute,? the report found, citing the most recent data from Statistics Canada. ?Despite the relatively short commute times, the majority of Aurora residents (87 per cent) use driving as their main form of transportation during the week. This is followed by transit use, including GO Rail, local transit, and school buses, at 7 per cent. Active transportation, such as walking and cycling, accounts for approximately 5 per cent of the overall transportation mode share in Aurora.?

In consultation with Aurora residents, consultants say community members identified ?challenges? within the existing active transportation network which affect how often residents use them, including ?lack of a connected cycling and trail network, concerns about high speed and noise from vehicle traffic, poor conditions of some existing sidewalks and trails, [and] connections to key Town destinations? such as the GO Station.

?A key task of the Active Transportation Master Plan (ATMP) was to develop a proposed active transportation network for Aurora that was?designed with an equitable lens to ensure that underserved communities will have optimal access to the network. Along with equity and connectivity considerations, the proposed network is intended to be universally accessible to people of all ages and abilities,? they said. ?In total, the Town of Aurora's recommended active transportation and trails network is made up of almost 490 km or routes. Approximately 300 km is existing and this ATMP proposes about 190 km of new routes.

?To create a culture of walking, cycling and micro-mobility use in the Town of Aurora, financial investment and other resources need to be strategically allocated. The ATMP outlines phasing and maintenance strategies that are intended to guide decision-making on active transportation policy and planning processes while being flexible enough to adapt to changes in active transportation trends or other opportunities that may arise over the years as the network is being implemented.?

Short term goals ? those that can be accomplished within ten years of the plan's adoption ? include ?quick wins? of signed bike routes, ?conventional or buffered? bike lanes, physically separated facilities along roadways, the further development of sidewalks and the implementation of ?road diets? to facilitate traffic flow.

A road diet in this context is a reduction of lanes for through traffic to allow bike infrastructure and on-street parking ? particularly on Yonge Street and the Aurora Promenade area in the Town's historic downtown core.

Consultants said this would allow for further turn lanes that would ?really benefit businesses in terms of access to and from those properties compared to the current condition,? but said doing so at Orchard Heights would require ?significant design modifications.?

‘The concept has been talked about for many years now,’ said Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson. ‘In the past when I have raised the concern, I am looking for more evidence, more details to corroborate that this is the right thing for us to do in our downtown core.

‘When I go online and just search myself to understand road diets and implementation in other communities, there is certainly a lot of positive results and information available for anybody who wants to do some research’ but there are also come cases where it didn't work out and they've had to reverse it or it has created other issues. I am a little concerned when I see it being identified as a quick win to implement that program; I don't know if collectively we have done enough due diligence to support the idea and make all of Council and myself fully aware of not just the benefits but also any potential risks.’

Another concern voiced at the table came from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese who questioned how Metrolinx' plans to add a double track through Aurora on the GO line to allow for all-day, two-way 15-minute train service, and potentially a traffic underpass beneath Wellington Street, would impact plans for grade-separated active transportation infrastructure.

‘Is there a reason for it being a priority 10 years from now as opposed to somewhere between now and 10 years?’ he asked.

The consultant replied the priority is to complete a feasibility study to get ‘a better appreciation of what would be involved to design and implement’ some of the grade separations.

The Wellington Corridor, agreed Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, was a ‘sticking point’ and the current configuration of the rails bisecting Aurora was a ‘great divide’ that is an ongoing challenge. Now is the time to advocate for Aurora's priorities and send a message that more infrastructure is needed for east-west connectivity.

‘[Metrolinx] will be double tracking and that will then guide York Region in what they can do from that point on to provide pathway connections to the GO Station to both east and west of Yonge Street and beyond Yonge Street to Bathurst,’ said the consultant.

Added Councillor Gilliland: ‘I understand there are a lot of challenges between Yonge and the GO because it is very narrow, but at the very least, especially with the development that will occur down that local corridor, it (traffic) is only going to increase. I have families who say they can't walk strollers, there is nowhere to go. It is a challenge, so I would just prefer to highlight that as I feel, for Aurora, it is a priority to be able to connect east and west.’

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