

Aurora's new Active Transportation Master Plan nears approval

Aurora's upcoming Active Transportation Master Plan will be subject to a further staff report before final approval.

Council last week formally received a presentation and report made by consultants from WSP Canada in early March outlining the development of the Plan and recommendations contained therein.

The Plan (ATMP) will help guide the development of active transportation – including trails and bike routes – within Aurora over the next 20 years, keeping in mind future growth projections and ensuring that active transportation is sustainable and safe in the long-run.

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.

Surveying 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 of 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.

Before Council accepted the presentation on March 26, Ward 5 resident and cycling advocate Steve Fleck said more focus needs to be put on connectivity within the trails system, particularly east to west, and in accessing transit easily and safely.

–In much of suburban Canada, including places like Aurora, we are woefully behind where we could and should be on active transportation and associated and needed infrastructure,– said Fleck. –Over the past 30 plus years, and decision after decision seems to have been made by planners and governments assuming that everyone will drive everywhere for everything – further and further entrenching car dependency. This has resulted in roads clogged with traffic congestion and now personal transportation by car is the fastest-growing CO2 emissions category in Canada. The numbers of the latter just keep going up and up. Worth noting is roughly 30 per cent of car trips made in Canada are less than 3 km. Car dependency also leads to, collectively, significantly less physical activity with the knock on negative effects it has on physical and mental health. The good news in Aurora is due to several key factors. There is great hope and opportunity with improved active transportation.–

A feature which sets Aurora apart from many other communities, he said, is having its main transportation hub – the GO Station – right in the centre of the Town.

?That's rare in the GTA to have a huge positive asset built and active transportation feeding into it. ?In Aurora, there have been past attempts at bike lanes here and there and some multiuse paths that have been added here and there, but few of these are linked up directly to true utilitarian use. As an example, there currently is no direct and safe way to access the GO Train station approaching from the east. There is a multiuse path along Wellington but it ends at John West Way and Mary Street.

?You can see the GO Train station 400 metres off in the distance, but there is no safe way currently to directly access that by bike. The walk is a bleak one and a bit unsafe, if you are on foot. With GO Train station parking kind of at a max capacity, the only way to get more users there with increasing GO Service will be increasing the numbers that arrive by other means other than a car.?

Council, he concluded, needs to ?follow the lead? of cities like Edmonton, Las Vegas, and Tucson, AZ, to incorporate considerations for active transportation in all of their decision-making processes ? including Tucson's requirement for a bike lane to be installed whenever a road is resurfaced.

Speaking in support of the ATMP was Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese ? but as much as he supported what was there, one missing component were those all-important connections, including at points of St. John's Sideroad and headed towards the GO.

?We only have crossings for cyclists and pedestrians wherever we have traffic and cars,? he said of the transit hub. ?There has been no real effort to try to mitigate that problem, yet I see it in the Plan, but it is proposed and I think it is proposed for years and years forward. What I hope that the Active Transportation group and Traffic Safety can do is start putting some meat on those bones so we can start planning for the connection east and west underneath the GO and it will likely take some cooperation amongst the various levels of government but I think it is something that has to be done very soon.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter