

Full impact of Yonge Street 'road diet' needs to be assessed: Council

A proposal to dramatically change the current traffic flow of Yonge Street from Orchard Heights in the north to Golf Links in the south could be subject to further review this fall, separate from the study from which it originated.

Last week, Council members took their first formal review of the Town's draft new Master Transportation Study, a plan which proposes a 'road diet' on the Yonge Street corridor which would see the current traffic flow reduced to a single lane in each direction, a centre lane dedicated for turning and the balance of road space turned over for bike lanes and/or on-street parking.

The draft Master Transportation Study was presented to lawmakers at last week's General Committee meeting by project manager Jonathan Chai, who said a similar traffic pattern was being explored by the City of Brampton.

'We assessed Yonge Street from an operational perspective as well as a safety perspective,' said Mr. Chai. '[A road diet] basically means there are two lanes in each direction on Yonge Street today and that could be reduced to one lane in each direction. In order to do that, the way that turns are made from Yonge Street today, they are shared with the thru-lanes. As soon as a car is waiting to turn left and access a driveway or to turn onto Wellington Street, for example, effectively the number of travel lanes becomes one thru-lane per direction in any event.

'We feel [a road diet] would be a key recommendation for the Town through the Downtown Core. The other benefit of the road diet would be there would be more space for sidewalks and for streetscaping to improve the overall attractiveness of the street for people to gather. You could also provide dedicated parking spaces along Yonge Street where you don't have the dedicated turn lane. A number of opportunities are opened up by this improvement.'

This is not the first time Council has considered a model to change the lane configuration of Yonge Street through the Downtown Core.

A similar model was proposed in the last term of Council by then-mayor Geoff Dawe, one which would have seen Yonge reduced to a single lane in either direction with the balance of space turned over for a significant increase in on-street parking.

That idea fizzled at the table and this latest 'road diet' proposal was also received last week with a degree of skepticism.

'What happens when there's a bus and it stops?' asked Mayor Mrakas. 'We block the traffic, or would there be a lay-by for the bus?'

Mr. Chai responded that a more detailed feasibility study would need to be undertaken to examine the full impacts of the road diet.

?I will say that with two lanes, you can design it in a way such that you have the turning lane at the intersection, but set back or on the other side of the intersection, there could be space for a bus lane,? he said. ?There are ways to do it and more studies need to be done to address that.

?The detailed feasibility study would include more detailed traffic analysis as well as probably a preliminary design. We're envisioning it as a conceptual design to look at how those lanes could be implemented within the existing corridor and the existing right of way. We would need to work with York Region to make sure they are in agreement with the conceptual plan that would be developed and the traffic analysis would need to support the recommendations of that conceptual plan.?

Analysis, however, will need to be extensive, Council agreed.

While the ?road diet? proposal came out of the draft Master Transportation Study, Council voted to take this particular proposal out of their overall approval of the Study in favour of looking at the proposal on its own to consider the full impact such a change might have on the community.

In a decision set to be ratified this week, Council voted to refer the matter for further consideration as part of the 2021 Capital Budget talks set for this fall.

?We have a substantial idea to reconfigure our downtown core with this road diet which we have, as a group, agreed that downtown revitalization is one of the primary objectives of this term, and what I have before me says that the road diet concept is generally referred to as a transportation improvement concept,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I get that, yet I am also asked to endorse in principle moving forward with this concept [but] I have very little information from a broader perspective to understand what the impact [is]. At the same time, we're going to be asked to move forward on a \$50 million project for the revitalization of our Downtown Core. I would like to understand the relationship of those two pieces.?

Supporting Councillor Thompson's motion to refer the matter to the Capital Budget process was Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

?This allows us to have more time to learn and grow and see what that looks like,? she said. ?I still have a hard time envisioning what that would mean for our Yonge Street downtown core. I am interested in seeing what Brampton has to offer. I think it would be good to pass it by the Economic Development Board [and] the Community Advisory Committee to get their feedback as well.?

By Brock Weir