

Lawmakers urge Metrolinx to forge ahead on Wellington Street grade separation

As Council revisits the possibility of a train whistle cessation program for Aurora this week, lawmakers are urging Metrolinx to forge ahead with a grade separation on Wellington Street East to minimize long-term traffic disruption resulting from all-day two-way GO Train service through Town.

Council will be asked this week to earmark an additional \$105,000 from reserves, from an already budgeted \$95,000, to begin a Train Whistle Cessation Safety Assessment focusing on what needs to be done for at-grade rail crossings, such as those on Wellington and at St. John's Sideroad, to implement just such a program.

Should Metrolinx go ahead with a grade separation, taking the form of a vehicular underpass, this would take Wellington out of the equation, and Mayor Tom Mrakas is encouraging the transit provider to make it a reality.

The Mayor stated his position in a letter to Metrolinx' Interim CEO Michael Lindsay, which he shared with The Auroran at the start of the week.

'Wellington Street serves as a vital east-west artery through Aurora, carrying significant volumes of traffic daily,' he wrote. 'Without the proposed grade separation, the increased frequency of train service will result in prolonged closures of the rail crossing, shutting down this main thoroughfare for up to a quarter of the day. The level of disruption is unacceptable and would have severe implications for residents, businesses and emergency services in our community.'

Additional developments around the GO Station, which has been identified as a Major Transit Station Area (MTSA) for residential growth by the Province, will only exacerbate the existing problem, he added, calling for 'immediate action' on design and implementation.

'Investing in the grade separation now will not only alleviate current traffic congestion but also support the Town of Aurora in accommodating the growth associated with the MTSA while advancing Metrolinx' objectives of enhanced transit service. Delaying this project risks compromising both local mobility and regional transit goals.'

While Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese says he would like to see further details on Metrolinx' rationale and position on why they wouldn't proceed with the grade separation, he said he supported the Mayor's statement as it stands.

'That grade separation is absolutely necessary if we're to maintain any kind of traffic control along one of the major arteries of this Town,' said Councillor Weese, stating any idea of not moving ahead with it shows there's a lack of understanding on their part on how increased rail service will impact the community. 'For instance, if they declined because of some geotechnical or some engineering reason that it just isn't feasible to do it, that's a different story. If it's a matter of money and finances, I think they need to reassess their priorities because this may have a devastating effect on traffic flow in our community.'

'Much of the issue around grade separation is compounded by the problems or the recent developments that have been approved along Berczy Street and the amount of construction and the amount of building that is going to go on Berczy Street. The timing of this, should it happen, anywhere around the same time is a perfect storm of problems with respect to traffic congestion, parking, construction, all the rest of the things that go along with this kind of progress. While most people believe that the Metrolinx proposal to provide 15-minute service both ways to and from Aurora seems to be the way of the future and most people recognize the value of that, the timing of it and the timing of significant development in that particular major transit station area has to be managed and it has to be managed properly or it is not going to be a very good place for Ward 1 residents or anyone coming in or out to inhabit the area.'

In the meantime, Aurora is poised to take another look at a trail whistle cessation program.

Should the Safety Assessment move forward, it will look at all four at-grade crossings: Engelhard Drive and Centre Street, which are on municipal roads, along with Wellington and St. John's, both of which are on Regional roads.

“The safety assessment is a mandatory study to be completed by the requesting municipality to ensure the proposed level crossings meet the requirements for implementation of train whistle cessation under the Transport Canada's guidelines,” says Michael Bat, Traffic Analyst for the Town of Aurora, in a report before Council. “The implementation of a whistle cessation program is a multi-year process. Typically, a safety assessment is undertaken as a first step to determine the safety upgrades that may be required. In the case of St. John's Sideroad and Engelhard Drive crossings, Metrolinx constructed pedestrian safety enhancements at these crossings as part of their larger corridor improvement work so the safety assessment would be undertaken now to determine if any additional safety features are required to implement a whistle cessation program.

“To complete the safety assessments as the next step in the process to implement train whistle cessation at all four level crossings, an additional budget of \$105,000 will be required, for a total of \$200,000. Once complete, the results of the assessment will better inform the design and construction costs to implement the infrastructure still required at each crossing.”

By Brock Weir