

Metrolinx might face tough questions next week

By Brock Weir

Representatives from Metrolinx are expected to face some tough questions from local lawmakers next week as Council pushes for answers on the impacts of rail expansion.

Metrolinx, the provincial body which oversees the operation of GO Transit, is expected to make a presentation before Council on March 28 on their plans to expand rail service on the Toronto to Barrie Corridor, which runs straight through Aurora.

As The Auroran reported last month, Council and Municipal Staff have identified a number of concerns over the plan, including the growing need for commuter parking, the impacts a grade separation on Wellington Street East at the GO Station might have on the surrounding community and, in particular, trail linkages at the potential new rail overpass at Wellington, further south at Cousins Drive, and near Ridge Road which Metrolinx maintains they have "no intention" of including unless the Town shoulders the cost.

"We have, over the decades, seen very infrequent GO Service and our young ones have been able to cross tracks safely," said Councillor John Abel at the last Council meeting. "When you have double tracks, electric, and increased service, that underpass is hugely important. If we're doing it for cars, we have to be doing it for our trails."

For many Councillors, time is of the essence in making Aurora's position clear to Metrolinx.

"If we don't do this now, we're going to end up losing the opportunity," said Councillor Sandra Humfryes, echoing comments made in a presentation earlier in the evening by Aurora trails advocate Klaus Wehrenberg that pedestrians and cyclists will have to go more than two kilometres out of their current way just to get to the other side of Town if the underpasses aren't included in the plan. "If we don't get this, we will have a Town divided. We made the importance [of trail underpasses clear in our Master Plan] and I feel there is an opportunity when they are plowing through our community. Yes, they provide services, but it is going to severely impact our Town and I think this is where we have to negotiate and look at what we need to do to get those trail crossings, as per our Trails Master Plan."

Negotiation was also key for Councillor Tom Mrakas, who likened this situation to the battle earlier in this Council term over the discontinuation of door-to-door mail delivery by Canada Post and the installation of community mailboxes.

"At the end of the day they are coming into our community," he said. "They are putting stuff on our property, coming into our community, and who best to know how we want our community to look and how we want our residents to be able to cross from east to west? They need to help us with that."

Although Metrolinx will be coming before Council on Tuesday to address these concerns, Aurora CAO Doug Nadorozny pointed out the Town has "regular meetings" with Metrolinx to discuss issues ranging from communications "which Council members regularly cite as problematic" to ongoing projects.

"We will have many more opportunities to comment in a formal way as the rest of the project rolls forward," said Mr. Nadorozny. "[Marco Ramunno, Aurora's Director of Planning] will have more insight into where those [trail crossing] opportunities exist, but this is the first in a number of [reports] that are going to come to the Town. We will be duplicating our input to Metrolinx on many levels, but where we're really making sure that we make these points is in working groups among staff that Council is looking for more movement from Metrolinx and that includes the trail crossings in particular."

Nevertheless, Council members expressed a degree of frustration with the current stalemate.

"You have said we will bring it to their attention, but I think [the danger needs to be emphasized] in what is going on," said Councillor Abel. "We have had a crossing on Cousins for a number of decades. Kids go to play soccer [at nearby Sheppard's Bush], it is part of our trails plan and it is not going to change. That is our concern. If they say they are engaging the communities, put their money where their mouth is. We are looking at an opportunity to do it while they are doing construction to save costs. What they are telling us is we're going to do all the work and it is going to cost you a fortune because we're not even going to discuss it with you and I think that is wrong."

"With all the other things that you (Metrolinx) are going to mess around with us, this we want to see done because it will make a difference for generations and who knows how life will change. The best transportation rail services in the world all accommodate pedestrians because that is how it moves. We have to afford that. If they are not prepared to answer that when they come to present I am sure it is not going to be just myself who is going to let them know in no uncertain terms."