

Metrolinx's big shift could mean big changes for Aurora

By Brock Weir

After months of contentious debate around the Council table, representatives from Metrolinx, the Provincial body operating GO Transit, appeared before local lawmakers last week to outline their vision for the future.

The vision itself is bold and could make for big changes in Aurora's downtown core.

The presentation was outlined to Council just days before the Federal Government came knocking with a nearly \$600 million cash infusion into the expansion of GO's Toronto to Barrie corridor, which services Aurora.

Among the key issues outlined by Nick Spensieri, Corridor Director for Metrolinx, is the construction of a new grade-separated crossing at Wellington Street, significant expansion at the GO Station, the stalemate between the Town and Metrolinx over pedestrian underpasses at key rail crossings, and the future of Berczy Street.

"[Congestion] is a real challenge and it is costing the GTHA millions of dollars a year," said Mr. Spensieri, himself an Aurora resident. "Right now, the average commute to Downtown Toronto can be 80 minutes. Residents have been asking for increased GO service for a long time and now we're getting ready to deliver.

"This is a big infrastructure build-up with local impacts. There is a lot of infrastructure to build, a lot of new technology and a lot of equipment required to achieve big service levels. Expanding the entire GO network requires more than 150 kilometres of new track, bringing in new electric trains, building new bridges and underpasses to accommodate the trail traffic, accommodating existing GO stations and constructing new stations in other locations to bring transit closer to home."

All-day two-way 15 minute GO service between Aurora and Toronto is one of the primary goals of the expansion when it comes to the Barrie line. From a wider perspective, there is also the goal of providing more GO Stations closer to home throughout the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

As far as Aurora is concerned, work has been underway since 2016 with the construction of a pedestrian tunnel at the GO Station. They are now into their second phase of design work, which will include new platforms, new station canopies, and new surface parking, primarily on their recently acquired property on Industrial Parkway South for parking purpose.

Construction on the next phase is set for the fall of 2018.

Parking was a primary concern with GO customers and residents at large alike, conceded Mr. Spensieri, noting the surface parking on 12 Industrial Parkway South would be used for cars displaced by the 2018 construction, in addition to overflow parking currently secured at Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church. In the meantime, they are also working with the Town of Aurora in studying further parking options, including shared parking at municipal facilities.

"While adding parking to our station, it is important to also look at the future of long-term solutions," he said, but the grade-separated crossing at Wellington is also part of that long-term solution.

"You have asked for it and we are delivering it," he said of separating the rail crossings from the flow of traffic. "We know it is a complex project, and personally I am concerned about three things; addressing the heritage elements and pedestrian connections, ensuring that 15 minute service is facilitated and, above all, ensuring safety in the community. We need to get this one right for you and your residents.

"We have met with Town Staff regarding their plan for pedestrian trails over or under the corridor. These tunnels are \$4 million to \$5 million each, but probably more given the site constraints. We don't have it in our budget currently. Although it is always best to have infrastructure built before the corridor goes into service, it doesn't mean that these tunnels or overpasses can't be built afterwards. We are working closely with Town Staff on these crossings. We know that they are important to you."

Over the next several months there will be "plenty of opportunity" until construction on the Wellington separation for the public to weigh on how the project will be delivered.

The next several months will also provide answers to residents and business owners along Berczy Street to know more about the future of the thoroughfare, often seen as the easternmost edge of Aurora's historic downtown core.

"I know that some residents have concerns about Berczy Street," said Mr. Spensieri. "It is important to keep that road open during and after construction. We are still really early on in the process of the design of the Wellington grade separation and what will happen with Berczy Street hinges on the design of the Wellington grade separation. It is tough to know whether we can keep it open during construction but we are committed to trying to accommodate this request."

Once design work is completed, he said, options for keeping it open will be examined.