

Pilot Yonge and Wellington turning ban gets final green light

By Brock Weir

A three-month pilot project, which will see a ban on left turns made on Yonge Street at Wellington starting in April got the final green light at Council last week.

The pilot project, which will conclude on June 30, 2017, is intended to improve traffic flow at Aurora's busiest intersection and was the result of months of talks both around the Council table and at the Region of York.

Starting April 1, left turns onto Wellington Street from northbound and southbound Yonge Street traffic will be banned Monday to Friday from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., and again from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m., with exceptions in place for York Region Transit.

The pilot project was approved at the Regional Level on October 6 and received final approval by Aurora Council in a 6 ? 2 vote. Voting against the plan were Mayor Geoff Dawe and Councillor Wendy Gaertner. Councillor Paul Pirri was absent from the meeting.

While Council members said they remained concerned over the impact a left turn ban would have on surrounding residential neighbourhoods, they said ongoing traffic monitoring will provide them with clear data on whether the pilot proves successful.

"We have all been to that intersection and we have all seen what goes on," said Councillor Tom Mrakas, getting the ball rolling on last week's discussion. "It is not the be all and end all solution, but I think it could be one thing in combination with many others [including] do we look at removing parking restrictions? I think that is something we need to look at down the road, but I think this is just something that we're going to try, the Region supports it [and] their staff think it is a worthwhile exercise to get that data."

The Councillors were responding to ongoing issues outlined to Council by a resident in open forum. Councillor Humfryes said he made "excellent" points, but pointed out many suggestions had been made over the years and nothing had been done.

"If this is going to fail, we will quickly pull it," she said. "I think we can build on something that will function nicely in the times during rush hour and slower times and I think it will make a big difference. I am looking forward to getting this launched and we can turn it off pretty quickly if it fails miserably. If it does show some relief, maybe we can keep it going from there."

Indeed, according to Mayor Dawe, Aurora's representative at the Regional Council table, mechanisms are in place for Regional Staff to pull the plug on the pilot project if they, or Council members start to see any negative impacts.

This was welcome news to Councillor Gaertner, but she said she still couldn't support the pilot.

"I have heard from a lot of residents that do not want this pilot project to happen and I am going to be voting against it to respect those residents' wishes, but I really hope it works out because we really need something to work."

But others said they were willing to give it a try.

"Like a lot of us who travel in Aurora, we get to know certain spots very well and the residents there would know as well as anyone the contributing factors," said Councillor John Abel. "I am willing to try the pilot and I am hoping it works."

Added Councillor Harold Kim: "When you hear the experiences of those who travel the intersection on a regular basis, it does hit home in terms of the gravity of the decision you will be making. I have heard from just as many for the left turn restriction as against. We have had this issue for many, many years in Aurora and I think the delegate made a great point that there may be very little difference or a mildly better experience, and we shouldn't use that as a scorecard to make that permanent."

For Councillor Kim, and Councillor Abel, it was very important to get that hard data back. The numbers, Councillor Kim said, have to be very "convincing" for Council to make this pilot project permanent.

"If the data is not convincing to keep it this way, I am willing to go back to the way it was."

A similar view was offered by Councillor Michael Thompson.

"We're going to look at some data that is going to be measured both before and after on the project to look at what is currently happening in terms of traffic patterns and infiltration into that intersection," he said. "We'll look at the repercussions and impacts of the left turn restrictions and then we will make a decision based on that information when this comes back. I think this is a way to make some real headway on the traffic issues that have been plaguing the Town of Aurora for many years."