

Yonge Street turn restrictions to start April 1

By Brock Weir

If you find yourself trying to turn left at Yonge and Wellington on April 1 and find it a little more difficult to do, it's no April Fools' joke.

The Region of York, at the Town of Aurora's request, is set to implement temporary left hand turn restrictions at Wellington Street for northbound and southbound Yonge Street traffic between the peak hours of 7 ? 9 a.m. and 4 ? 6 p.m., for a three month pilot project starting April 1, 2017.

The pilot project has been in the works for more than a year. The Town of Aurora received approval from the Region of York last month and the matter was ratified at Council this week.

?I suspect the rest of Council has received a number of emails expressing less than satisfaction with the process,? said Mayor Geoff Dawe on the community engagement leading up to this point.

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: ?I have not heard one positive thought. I think something needs to be done, but I am just not sure this is the thing.?

Despite these concerns being raised at the Committee level last Tuesday, the pilot project cleared the final two hurdles, the last of which was the final green light at this week's Council meeting. While the option to nip the plan in the bud was still on the table, other Councillors said it was important to see the impacts of the pilot.

?I know this has been on the books back and forth from the Region and I think in one of the reports since 1986,? said Councillor John Abel, offering feedback from residents concerned about the traffic infiltration this will lead to in streets surrounding Aurora's busiest intersection. ?I am not against trying something, but if there is a lot of outcry and it is not working, I wonder if there is a mechanism where we can say, ?Okay, now we have seen what the ramifications are, how can we cut that trial period short?'

?I was committed to trying it originally and I still am to see what happens because often when people complain they're not correct in what the outcome actually [is]. That has been my experience so far.?

Councillor Harold Kim said he was not convinced the left turn restrictions would work in the end either, but said doing nothing is getting the Town nowhere.

?We have done nothing for many years and we have had complaints about the intersection,? he said, adding he was most interested in making sure proper data is collected to gauge whether or not this will have a positive or negative impact on traffic. ?I would like to know from Orchard Heights to Kennedy how long it will take. If it currently takes five minutes and, after this adjustment, it takes two minutes, there is an obvious case that it is helping. Three months might be a little too long [for the pilot] but if we can get it shorter, I would be open to that as well. Trying something is better than doing nothing and getting more complaints about Yonge and Wellington.?

A pilot project beginning on April 1 would give the Town many months to reach out to the community and build awareness of what is to come, said Ilmar Simanovskis, Aurora's Director of Infrastructure. Plans include additional signage, advertising through the Town's Notice Board and Social Media, and possibly a community engagement session facilitated by the Region of York.

?If there was an overwhelming desire to cease the program, I would imagine direction of Council would be required [to cancel the project], that could be done very quickly and staff could terminate the pilot,? he said.

Councillors' fingers might already be inching towards the button to have them at the ready to cancel the project, but they said they are willing to forge ahead for the time being.

?There has been a continual urging for us as Councillors to do something about that intersection,? said Councillor Michael Thompson. ?I don't disagree that there are concerns, but is this the right thing to do? I have heard from people who are completely against it and don't think this is the right thing to do, but when I talk to them and say ?it is a question of do something or do nothing either way' you run the risk of alienating certain people. When you talk to them about doing something their usual response is you just need to widen the road, institute turn lanes and problems solve. That gets us into expropriation and we know it is not simple.

?We all agree it is an issue and we would all like to resolve the issue. We may not agree on what the solution is, but I am willing to move forward and try it. Part of it is?both the Regional traffic analysis staff and our own staff have said there is some validity to doing this and it would provide some benefit. Granted, it may create concerns on other streets but there seems to be some data out there to say it could improve the intersection.?

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas, one of the primary proponents of the project: ?Did I ever believe this was the be all and end all solution to this intersection? Absolutely not, but the data from 1998 shows that it improved the flow of the intersection. There is

infiltration right now onto the streets and the reason behind that is because of the backups. If we do find there is an issue and we do find there are more cars infiltrating into the neighbourhood, I will be the first one to say, 'Let's scrap the program.' I think it is imperative on us to give this a try because we are looking at all kinds of things to improve the intersection.?