

Changes to Yonge Street traffic proposed in study

Significant changes to Yonge Street traffic flows could become a reality in the next decade as Council considers updates to the Town's Master Transportation Study.

The study, which is up for consideration at next week's Council meeting, suggests a widened Yonge and Wellington intersection to allow a right-hand turn lane onto Wellington from southbound Yonge Street traffic. Also up for consideration is a reconfiguration of Yonge Street from Orchard Heights in the north to Golf Links Drive in the south, where the street would be limited to one lane of traffic in each direction with leftover space allocated for a centre turn lane and bike lanes.

Along the Yonge Street Corridor, a capacity and level of service analysis and progression analysis were conducted to identify any potential improvements to address existing operational issues, says Michael Bat, Traffic Analyst for the Town of Aurora, in his report to Council, which will receive a first sweep by local lawmakers at this week's General Committee meeting.

The reconfiguration of Yonge Street traffic is known as a "road diet" within the study. Bat says the implementation of such a system will enhance safety for all road users and create a pedestrian-oriented environment.

A road diet is generally referred to as a transportation improvement concept that reconfigures a four-lane cross-section with two lanes per travel direction to [a] three-lane cross-section with single lane per travel direction plus a centre two-way left turn lane, says Bat. This configuration provides storage for left-turn movements while additional space at the existing curbs may be utilized for either bike lanes, additional public realm/sidewalk width, or parking lay-bys depending on the existing pavement width, and the presence of side-streets and the need for the centre two-way left turn lane.

A similar concept was floated at the Council table in the last term by then-mayor Geoff Dawe, who proposed limiting Yonge Street in the Downtown Core to a single lane of traffic in each direction and the remaining space turned over to on-street parking in an aim to benefit local business.

This idea, however, was routinely voted down by the Council of the day.

A road diet on Yonge Street through the downtown core area should be considered to improve operations and safety, Bat continues. Although Yonge Street from south of Orchard Heights Boulevard/Batson Drive to Golf Links Drive/Dunning Avenue is under the jurisdiction of the Town, close coordination with York Region is required particularly at the critical Yonge

and Wellington intersection and also to address the implications on the YRT/VIVA service on Yonge Street.?

Should Council vote in favour of bringing this traffic model forward, public consultation will be the next steps, with a special emphasis on nearby businesses and residents, as well as further work with the Region of York to make it happen. Detailed designs for the model, if the concept is approved, will be part of 2021 budget deliberations this fall.

The second significant change proposed is a left-hand turn lane onto Wellington for southbound drivers which has been a perennial call from Aurora residents.

It was a matter brought up by residents during the 2020 Budget process and, at the time, the Town reiterated that Council previously approved funding for a right-hand turn lane and next steps would be acquiring land, currently occupied by the Bank of Montreal (BMO) to 'facilitate' its development.

'This isn't something that has just come up in the last little while, this is something that has been going on for two decades now and no Town Council has ever done anything about it,' said resident Mark Holmes during the budget process. 'We have been sitting on [this issue] and it just keeps getting pushed to the backburner.'

'Council has tried every which way, and I think the Region has as well, to try and figure that out,' replied Councillor Wendy Gaertner. 'I don't really know what we can do at this point. We have looked at every conceivable idea to fix this and we have not been able to come up with a solution.'

Mayor Tom Mrakas offered a similar point of view, but assured the residents there was already some movement on this file.

The sticking point, however, is securing land in front of the Bank of Montreal, the current occupant of the intersection's northwest corner, to make the turn lane a reality.

'The only thing we don't have is we haven't expropriated the land yet,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'We don't own the land as of yet, but we are moving forward with the project. We will be looking at implementing a right turn lane there. How small or how big [the land to be expropriated] is doesn't make a difference on how you go about expropriating it, it is the same regardless of the piece of property.'

'That's the part that has been taking a bit of time at this point, but we are moving forward with it. I can't speak to why previous Councils before my time didn't move forward with it, what studies there were and why they didn't do anything, that's beyond me to speak to, but I can speak to the fact we are going to get it done.'

By Brock Weir