

First mile, last mile and Berczy Street solutions pushed by Council

By Brock Weir

When it comes to your morning or evening commute, it is often said that the first and last miles are the biggest challenge, and with all-day two-way GO Train service on the horizon for Aurora, local lawmakers and transit proponents are looking to make sure increased services do not increase the problem.

Councillors last week had the chance to address a growing laundry list of concerns when representatives from Metrolinx appeared before them to outline their vision for the future. Along with these concerns from Council members, Metrolinx reps also heard from active transportation activist Klaus Wehrenberg, who reiterated his position on the importance of installing pedestrian underpasses at rail crossings.

‘We are committed [to Aurora’s Master Trails Plan],’ said Councillor John Abel, highlighting Cousins Drive as one particularly important trail crossing identified by the plan. ‘If you are ripping up and doing construction, the thought is while you’re there doing this it would save a lot of money to consider putting an underpass there.’

With people crossing the tracks at Cousins for generations to get to the other half of town, whether it is to go to work, take their child to a soccer game at Sheppard’s Bush, or just going out for an evening walk, it will be hard to change the habits of the public, he continued.

Added Councillor Sandra Humfries: ‘It is very important for our community to [be able to] walk everywhere and we’re going to really hope that we can work closely together and get some funding to get those built along the way.’

It might have been optimistic as Metrolinx has repeatedly told the Town of Aurora that if they wanted the trail crossings they would have to foot the bill, but the door was not shut entirely.

Erin Moraz, Director of Communications and Community Relations for Metrolinx, told Council that a budget has been set based on required infrastructure but there might be an opportunity to bring that issue back to the table at some point to see if funding does become available.

‘It is completely fair to say it is not in the project budget,’ said Ms. Moraz. ‘That does not mean that that is not something [the corridor director] can bring back and see if there is an additional opportunity.’

Added Councillor Tom Mrakas, who also stressed the importance of pursuing the nine possible underpasses outlined in the plan as ‘crucial’ in being completed: ‘I guess there is still an opportunity, so we will press hard.’

Council also continued to press on the perennial issue of making it easier and more convenient to get to and from the GO Station and, in turn, make transit a more viable and attractive option for commuters, namely small shuttles to get to and from.

‘It is so important for us to invest in this infrastructure to get cars off the roads to address these issues,’ said Councillor Michael Thompson on statistics offered by Metrolinx that the commute to Toronto could be up to 80 minutes. ‘You made reference to the first mile and the last mile and, to me, that is the importance of getting people to and from the station. I recognize there are some challenges with regulatory issues, but are there other ideas Metrolinx is exploring in terms of inter-agency cooperation and looking at things like ride sharing?’

According to Nick Spensieri, coordinator for the Barrie corridor, the planning department has a ‘full suite of things’ they are looking at from carpooling to ‘micro-busing.’

‘We’re looking at even the Uber things that work,’ he said. ‘We are definitely working with YRT (York Region Transit) and Viva to see if there is better connectivity. We’re looking at the full slate of things to implement because, with the growth in the community, you just can’t keep providing parking ad-nauseam.’

Added Ms. Moraz: ‘There are regulatory and legislative restrictions on Metrolinx in terms of services we can offer within a municipal boundary. Where we run service now is interregional right across municipal boundaries so shuttle services are complicated. There have been very specific and limited instances where we have offered them during construction or something in the past, but it is definitely something our planning department is looking at, along with our transit authority counterparts.’

Council hopes Metrolinx is also looking closely at land expropriation and long-lasting impacts to make this large-scale transit overhaul a reality. According to Mr. Spensieri, a plan is being developed for Aurora’s planning department on challenges Metrolinx might encounter along the way but, as of yet, they have not reached out to specific people from a real estate perspective because a lot still needs to be figured out.

Councillor Mrakas, however, pressed for further dialogue on the future of Berczy Street, a future which was left up in the air pending the design and construction of the grade-separated rail crossing at Wellington Street. The Councillor asked what dialogue

has taken place yet between Metrolinx and homeowners and businesses along the street, including the possibility that once construction is completed, the street itself might no longer exist as a thoroughfare.

?The only reason why we haven't moved to start contacting property owners is that we haven't gotten anywhere near design to look at what we actually need to take or maybe not take at all,? said Mr. Spensieri. ?We're very reluctant until we have some solid design work in place that allows us to take a look at what the options are before we just start knocking on people's doors and creating a problem where there might not be one.?