

Increased accessibility needed in transit plan, says Council

York Region should put increased focus on accessibility when it comes to transit.

This was the message delivered by Aurora Council this month to representatives from the Region as they presented their 2022 Transportation Master Plan update to local lawmakers.

The updated Master Plan is intended to be a blueprint for the Region through 2051.

It includes plans for road cycling and trail networks throughout the Region, increased development for rapid transit, road improvements, and more.

It's guided by five key focuses: safety for all travellers, transportation equity (providing transportation options that fit all lifestyles and abilities), a reduction in car travel, particularly during rush hours, financial and environmental sustainability, and a review of the role and function of Regional corridors.

Presented by Brian Titherington, Director of Transportation and Infrastructure Planning for the Region, alongside Lauren Crawford, York's Manager of Transportation Long-Term Planning, Council received the update with particular focus on reducing car travel, expanding transportation options, and achieving equity.

Transportation equity is a newer area for us and this really looks at providing transportation options that fit all lifestyles, financial situations, and abilities," said Crawford. "This focus area will explore whether there's an equal opportunity for access to transportation facilities and services for all travellers and whether or not new policies and initiatives are needed.

[Reducing car travel] looks at options that will allow travellers who are able and interested to use methods of travel other than by car during the busiest travel times. Reviewing the role and function of Regional corridors is intended to explore a number of important actions, including reviewing the ownership and maintenance of cycling facilities and street lighting; identifying the best way to safely accommodate walking, cycling, and newer options such as e-scooters and e-bikes along Regional roads, evaluating the effectiveness of HOV and transit lanes, and whether or not the current six-lane policy needs to be updated."

Regarding the issue of equity, Titherington said equity went beyond simply improving accessibility. It is looking at "some of the inherent biases that might be in our network, not just for people who have accessibility issues or who may have issues with lifestyle or income, or other elements."

"I think the first step is really defining what equity means," he said. "We have a diversity policy at the Region in a general sense, but what does that mean with respect to our transportation system? We need to define what those problems are. There are certain people of certain backgrounds and abilities that have a harder challenge on our network, which is a mix of rural and urban, managing our network, but there might be other communities that have accessibility issues or disadvantages in our network."

For local Councillors, a key piece in this puzzle is ensuring connectivity.

In the case of Councillor Wendy Gaertner, who lives in Aurora's southwest, she said it often takes up to an hour to use transit to access the Viva rapid network or to reach the GO Station.

"If you live on the west side of Yonge, whether you're north or south of Wellington, and you want to take a York Region bus to GO Station, you're looking at, depending on where you are in the loop, it takes about an hour to do the loop."

Connectivity was also an issue for Councillor Rachel Gilliland who questioned Regional staff on what their plans were to increase connectivity for cyclists along Wellington Street, particularly between Yonge and Bathurst.

?I have been pretty loud about the connectivity of the cycling programs throughout Aurora and one of the big ones I especially hear from a lot of constituents is the connection [here],? she said. ?My question to you is, how long do you anticipate Aurorans will have to wait to have that east-to-west connectivity from Wellington and Yonge to Bathurst??

This is, said Crawford, an area where the Region has conducted an environmental assessment.

?It's certainly an area we have been talking to Metrolinx with, as well as Aurora staff, about their expansion of the Barrie GO line network, so I know that there will be some upcoming changes as part of Metrolinx' work in the area. It is not an area that is on our plan at this point in time. We're really looking to addressing the work that is needed for the GO expansion project.?

Added Titherington, ?The cycling network will be built over time. Some of it will be built through development [and] we will be looking at potential partnerships. We are looking at projects or partnerships where we can add cycle lanes, especially on the boulevard in certain areas.?

An additional issue raised by Councillor Gilliland was that of sidewalks on Bathurst, particularly near Aurora's southern edge. This is an area frequently travelled by students attending both Cardinal Carter CHS and ESC Renaissance.

?There are limitations to kids getting a ride on a bus from a certain distance, which leaves a lot of students who have no choice but to walk on Bathurst Street to get to school,? she said, adding she saw it as an immediate need to be addressed for residents.

A potential hurdle, said Titherington, is the two-tiered approach taken by the Region and its nine municipalities over sidewalks. Responsibility for sidewalks comes under the jurisdiction of local municipalities, he said, even if they are on Regional roads.

Potential sidewalks could be considered through road renewal programs, he concluded.

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