

Ten to 12-lane Hwy. 401 proposed to improve flow

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By Tim Foran
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Widening Hwy. 401 by two or three lanes in each direction through Milton and Halton Hills is the main alternative being considered by the Province to improve traffic along the clogged corridor.

"As far as I'm concerned, that's fine for me as long as it gets the traffic off Steeles Avenue," said Bob Gracey, a 41-year resident of Hornby who attended an open house in Milton last week hosted by the Ministry of Transportation (MTO).

The MTO has determined that proposed transit improvements, including the expansion of all-day, two-way GO Train service to Milton and Georgetown, won't be enough to help people and goods flow smoothly along Hwy. 401 in the future.

However, the expansion from Regional Road 25 to Trafalgar Road might not be reserved for cars. The MTO is also considering the addition of bus bypass shoulders and/or high-occupancy vehicle lanes, more commuter parking lots and accommodations for bike lanes across the highway.

The MTO, which is currently doing an environmental assessment study examining improvements to the nine kilometre stretch of highway, plans to release its finalized design in late 2011. That's too late for at least one attendee to the open house.

"They don't need to do the studies. The road width is already there. I mean, what are they studying?" said Milton Regional Councillor Colin Best.

The planning and construction process for highways can take up to eight years, according to MTO documents. Improvements to the Milton/Halton Hills section might also be stuck waiting for other Hwy. 401 projects in Mississauga to be completed.

The Province has begun expanding a section of Hwy. 401 from six to 12 lanes from Hurontario to Hwy. 410, a project expected to be completed in August, 2013, according to contract details on the MTO website.

The MTO has also started background work on widening the highway between approximately Hurontario to Trafalgar but it hasn't yet selected a consultant to begin the official environmental assessment study.

However, it's expected the highway through that section will be widened to 10 and 12 lanes through various stretches, according to a recent report released as part of the Province's GTA West transportation corridor study.

In Milton/Halton Hills, the preliminary alternative is to widen the highway from its current six lanes to 10 lanes between Regional Road 25 and James Snow Parkway and either 10 or 12 lanes between James Snow and Trafalgar.

Deciding whether or not there will be 12 lanes, made up of collector and express sections, won't be made until the Province's GTA West study team determines if it wants to go ahead with a new transportation corridor connecting Hwy. 401 in Milton to Hwy. 400 north of Vaughan. If the study team determines the corridor is necessary, and the best starting point is at Tremaine Road, then the Province might only need to widen Hwy. 401 to 10 lanes.

"They need collector lanes eventually so why not now?" questioned Bill Gibson, a 33-year-old Milton resident.

Gibson drives a gravel truck from Aberfoyle to Toronto multiple times a day and says the traffic has become progressively worse since the late 1990s.

"I'd say a little over 10 years ago, morning rush (hour traffic) would stop in front of the airport," he recalled. Now, he says there might be congestion as far west as Hwy. 6 on a sunny morning.

Both Gracey's and Gibson's complaints

about increased traffic are borne out by MTO statistics. In 1996, about a half decade before Milton started growing, the directional peak volume on Hwy. 401 between Regional Road 25 and Trafalgar was approximately 4,500 vehicles. Today, that figure is 7,000, and it's expected to grow to 8,500 by 2018 and 10,000 by 2028.

Gibson, a private owner-operator, said he would like to use Hwy. 407 if the Province bought it back and made it free or cheaper.

"They need to get Metrolinx working on an expanded GO service to Milton as well," said Best. "It doesn't take years to do something that's pretty obvious."

It does, however, take money, something the deficit-laden Province is in short supply of at the moment.

The expansion of GO Train service to Milton has been estimated at \$1.23 billion, according to Metrolinx's consultant.

The MTO hasn't estimated the cost to widen Hwy. 401. However, the widening would also require the CN railway and Fifth Line bridges to be widened and the Sixth Line bridge to be replaced. There would also have to be improvements made to the bridges and interchanges at Regional Road 25, James Snow and Trafalgar.

An MTO official present at the open house ruled out the possibility of a new interchange between James Snow and Trafalgar for safety reasons.

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Plaza used as drivers' shortcut

The Town of Milton says it can't stop drivers from using a retail plaza at the northeast corner of Main Street and James Snow Parkway as a way to cut into the lineup for the eastbound Hwy. 401.

At certain times in the morning rush hour, vehicles back up along Main Street waiting to turn left onto James Snow. After making the turn, they must get into a queue in the right hand lane to get on the ramp to the highway. The plaza, which has a gas station, coffee shop and other stores, has a dual entrance and exit on both Main Street and James Snow.

Milton commuter Patti Buckley, in a letter to Ontario Ministry of Transportation officials that was copied to the *Champion*, said drivers who didn't want to wait to turn left from Main onto James Snow were driving through the plaza and then trying to cut into

the lineup to get onto the highway. She described the tactic as frustrating to those drivers who were trying to handle the long wait with civility.

"Why, when the plaza at the corner was designed, was it never thought out that you should only be able to enter this plaza from James Snow, and only exit coming out of the plaza on Main Street?" asked Buckley, a question the *Champion* directed to Town officials responsible for approving the plaza site plan.

"That is really up to the plaza owner," responded Paul Cripps, the Town's director of engineering services. "We have checked with the police and there is nothing in the Highway Traffic Act that prevents this from happening. If the plaza owner wanted to pursue it, they could charge the people with trespassing."

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