

PLANNING TO GET MOVING



'York Region is a well-planned community. We have spearheaded a very aggressive transit program; as aggressive as anywhere in the province.'

Bryan Tuckey
regional planning commissioner

BY ROY GREEN
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If you think York Region is the only place plagued by traffic congestion, think again.

In Portugal this week, a donkey cart beat a Porsche in a two-kilometre race.

The cart, pulled by a seven-year-old donkey named Tironi, was the first to reach the port of Viana do Castelo from the suburb of Areosa in the race, staged to highlight the extent of traffic congestion in northern Portugal.

So, as you while away your life in neighbourhood traffic, take heart: you are not alone.

Newmarket council passed a resolution this week calling on the region and the province to accelerate major road projects, including widening Hwy. 404 to three lanes in each direction to Davis Drive.

Roads built to accommodate daily traffic of 30,000 vehicles are facing volumes of 51,000 and local streets built for 1,500 cars are seeing 5,000, Newmarket Regional Councillor Tony Van Bynen said. Six of 12 primary intersections are facing gridlock during peak hours — all this in just 14 square miles.

In Markham, the board of trade said traffic jams are driving businesses away. In a presentation to regional council in June, board president Ruth Burkholder said parts of Hwy. 7, Warden Avenue and Kennedy Road become parking lots during peak traffic periods.

How did we get to this point? And is anyone doing anything about it?

"Since the early 1990s and with the region's official plan in 1994, we've been changing the way we plan urban structure," said Bryan Tuckey, the region's planning commissioner. "Our transportation master plan is a framework to change the pattern of the way (traffic) planning was done in the past."

Steering large hunks of future growth into four higher density centres in Markham, Richmond Hill, Vaughan and Newmarket is a key element of that planning.

But even the best-laid plans failed to cope with the fastest population growth in Canada, according to regional planners.

Cross Roads

York's congestion challenge

"Over the last five years, the region's population has increased by roughly the equivalent population of the Town of Aurora every year," Neil Garbe, the region's director of community planning, said.

"We've been trying to keep pace with 35,000 to 40,000 new people each year."

In the 33 years since the region was created in 1971, the population has grown from 169,000 to 855,000 and York is now the sixth largest municipality in Canada.

So, why not build roads before homes go up?

"In theory, that would be great," said Paul May, the region's director of infrastructure planning. "The way development charges are set, when development happens, is when you get the development charges. The other danger of getting too far ahead is sometimes development plans change. You don't want to be wasting funds for something you require in 10 years time."

When Infrastructure Minister David Caplan announced Ontario's plans to cope with urban sprawl last month, he called it the "last chance to build the future we want."

At current rates, new housing will consume 1,000 square kilometres of the countryside, an area double the size of Toronto, by 2031. Traffic congestion would also add 45 per cent to commuting times and air quality will suffer with a 40-per-cent increase in vehicle emissions, Mr. Caplan said.

While there is a plan for coping with congestion, implementation doesn't always keep pace with growth, according to Mr. May.

"Sometimes we get delayed on a project through the environmental assessment process or property acquisition, design or permits," he said.

The region's approach to traffic

JUST THE FACTS

Vehicle trips between the region and Toronto from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. increased by 57,000 between 1998 and 2001.

The Toronto Board of Trade estimates the cost of delays and wasted fuel due to traffic congestion in the GTA in 1996 was \$600 million. By 2021, it will grow to \$3 billion.

The average GTA car carries only 1.16 people, while one GO bus can replace 50 cars. The average GO train carries the same number of people as 1,400 cars.

The typical number of vehicles in one kilometre of bumper-to-bumper traffic is about 130. The number of buses needed to transport the same number of people — while taking only 60 metres of road space — is four.

congestion is three-pronged, according to Mr. May:

- Road widening and improvements to local roads, regional roads and highways;

- A major rapid transit program; and

- Travel demand management programs to find alternatives to automobile use, such as car pools, cycling, working from home and staggered work hours.

The region's 2004 budget includes almost \$180 million for road construction and maintenance, \$88 million for transit and another \$82 million for the first phase of Quick Start, its ambitious rapid transit program.

It has also opened the first of three Smart Commute centres in the region to implement traffic demand management programs.

"York Region is a well-planned community," Mr. Tuckey said. "We have spearheaded a very aggressive transit program; as aggressive as anywhere in the province."

"But addressing the problem of infrastructure, as we've said over and over again, is a sustainability issue. We really do need money from the upper levels of government for infrastructure."

What would it take to get you to commute by public transit? Check out our poll in the Discussion Forums section of yorkregion.com



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