

New road route on table

By Andrew Baulcomb • Metroland West Media Group Flamborough News
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Plans for a \$1.5-billion mid-peninsula highway between Halton and Niagara may be dead nearly a decade after the route was proposed, but long-range plans for a new corridor connecting the 403 at Ancaster/Brant with Highway 407 near Burlington/ Milton still pose a threat to farmland and the natural environment of Flamborough.

So while the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) says the super-highway won't be necessary to accommodate traffic needs, the province hasn't abandoned the idea of one leg of the highway that was being studied as part of the bigger transportation plan. That leg will run through Flamborough between Ancaster and Burlington and remains a bone of contention for members of Citizens Opposed to Paving the Escarpment (COPE).

Flamborough resident Sue McMaster, co-chair of the group, said COPE is still doing a review of a large document recently released in connection with the MTO's transportation development strategy. Details of the strategy were on display at recent Public Information Centres on the Niagara to GTA study, including sessions held in Burlington last Wednesday and in Ancaster last Monday.

Southern Ontario is expecting a population boom of 4.5 million people over the next two decades, but Will Mackenzie, a spokesperson for MTO, said the super-highway won't be required after all.

"We felt that even after 2031, there would be no immediate need for the section between Ancaster and Welland," said Mackenzie, who is also a Flamborough resident.

Instead, the province plans to focus on other transit initiatives such as Metrolinx, a provincial agency which placed a \$770 million order for 182 light rail vehicles earlier this month.

Super-highway

The original expressway plan called for one super-highway looping from Burlington around Ancaster and south Hamilton Mountain, eventually winding up in Fort Erie/Niagara.

Rather than building one large expressway between Halton and Niagara, several smaller projects involving the QEW and 403 have been proposed by a Niagara-GTA study team. Mackenzie said that "there were a number of (other) issues" involved in the recent cancellation of the mid-peninsula highway.

He cited the 2003 Richmond Landfill decision in Napanee as one of the most pressing issues facing the highway's completion.

The Richmond case involved a proposed landfill expansion, where divisional courts sided with the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) regarding what are known as terms of reference.

The courts ruled that environmental assessments in Ontario have to include needs and alternatives on any given project.

In the case of the super-highway, it was determined there was not enough need.

"That decision became case law ... that's why the mid-peninsula project was one of many pulled off the table," Mackenzie said.

The provincial Liberals launched an environmental assessment into the super-highway in 2005, and the issues of need and environmental impact on the surrounding lands have been major points of contention ever since.

With the mid-peninsula highway now off the table, new options include a new corridor study for the Ancaster-Burlington connection; a corridor between the QEW in Fort Erie/Niagara and Highway 406 in Welland; a widening of the QEW between Highway 406 in St. Catharines and the Freeman Interchange in Burlington (QEW-403-407); operational improvements on Highway 403 between the Ancaster-Brant County border and the Freeman Interchange in the short term.

In a letter sent to a Niagara-GTA study team on January 8, COPE co-chairs McMaster and Dave Bailey said they were "opposed to any scenario that includes building a new highway corridor or inflicts a new cut on the Niagara Escarpment."

McMaster said the group plans to submit its preliminary assessment of the transportation plans to the study group by July 31. While there may be cause for celebration of the super-highway's demise in the wider community, the possibility of a highway running across Flamborough between Ancaster and Burlington remains a big concern, said McMaster.

"Why Flamborough is marked for pavement is beyond me," she said, noting that another highway through the area would change the local environmental landscape forever.

Increased pollution

Loss of agricultural land and increased air pollution from vehicular traffic are key concerns, said McMaster.

"We need to crack the whip under the butts of those who rule us," she said, stressing that political leaders who set the guidelines for transportation studies need to look beyond building new highways for the transportation of people and goods.

The rising cost of gas and the documented health costs associated with air pollution indicate that more creative solutions are needed, she said.

-With files from Dianne Cornish