Barrie council approves design for Harvie Road crossing

By Bob Bruton, Barrie Examiner
Tuesday, October 6, 2015 8:32:03 EDT PM

Barrie council approved a design for the Harvie Road crossing - a bridge to connect Harvie to Big Bay Point Road across Highway 400, to reduce traffic congestion and support south-end growth. Mark Wanzel/Photo

A caution sign has been thrown into plans to speed up Barrie's Harvie Road crossing.

City council approved the crossing's design - a bridge to connect Harvie to Big Bay Point Road across Highway 400, to reduce traffic congestion and support south-end growth - earlier this week.

But accelerating the 2020-21 completion timeline for the $33.6-million crossing will be easier said than done.

"We're not going to be cutting any corners," said Coun. Mike McCann.

Keith Strachan of the Harvie Road Coalition - landowners, businesses and some residents - wants the project's time-frame reduced to build the bridge faster.

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The coalition would like the crossing’s design done in one year, not two as scheduled, and the property for the bridge bought as it’s being designed, not afterward.

"We think we can compress some of that," Strachan said. "Our goal is shovels into the ground in 2018.”

But Coun. Doug Shipley pointed out the crossing’s design requires provincial approval, because it goes over Highway 400, and that speeding up the process by, for example, buying land before that approval is received could be a mistake.

"I want to see this done as soon as possible, but I don’t want to go out and buy land we don’t need," he said. "There are steps for a reason."

"I want to have the approvals in place."

Jacqueline Weston, the city’s engineering director, also said there could be consequences of moving too quickly.

"The risk is you could be buying land you don’t need," she said. "You don’t want to do that."

The crossing’s $1.5-million design is scheduled for this year, but councillors have asked staff to look into buying property there ($2 million) in 2017 and relocating utilities ($2.25 million) in 2018 — one year earlier than scheduled.

The city is also sending a letter to Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, the ministries of transportation, infrastructure and health, along with Barrie MPP Ann Hoggarth, asking them to work collaboratively to accelerate the province’s design and approval process for this project.

Mayor Jeff Lehman has also wondered why some of the steps couldn’t be done concurrently, instead of consecutively.

He suggested a website be set up to show Barrie residents and businesses how the project is proceeding.

"I’m not trying to embarrass the (provincial) ministries, but I want to document how long the process takes," he said, "to create an online trail to understand where we are.

"We want to be transparent about how long it takes."

Weston said city staff met with Ontario Transportation Ministry (MTO) officials last Friday and the ministry is aware of the need for this crossing.

"We will keep the pressure on, on a political level," Lehman said. "Things can sit for a while down there (Queen’s Park)."

The complexities of this project include property acquisition, utility relocation, working around a watercourse (Whiskey Creek), removing a secondary railway line, archeological sites, building five lanes that can eventually be widened to seven lanes, and dealing with the MTO.

The five-lane Harvie crossing over the highway is designed to be compatible with a potential, future seven-lane interchange and widened 400 — to eight or possibly 10 lanes — which likely wouldn’t happen for an estimated 20-30 years.

That would increase the project’s total cost to an estimated $61-$71 million, which could also include MTO funding.

Two-thirds of the crossing’s cost will be funded through development charges, the remainder from local tax dollars.

The crossing is just for the municipal road network.

If it becomes an interchange, however, there is an expected level of MTO funding — since it would connect with a provincial highway.

The Harvie Road crossing would also better connect city streets in that area with the Barrie Primary Care Campus, a medical facility scheduled to open in the spring of 2016.

It will be located at 370 Bayview Dr. and will accommodate a wide range of primary healthcare services.

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