

May 30th, 2016
Action Sandy Hill

Transportation Committee Members
Re. Airport Parkway/Lester Rd Widening Environmental Assessment

A. Introduction:

We are providing these written comments in relation to the Jun 1, 2016 TRC agenda item re. the Environmental Assessment for the widening of the Airport Parkway and Lester Rd.

We recognize that the topic of this TRC meeting is not primarily concerned with the timing and prioritization of this project and that these subjects will be dealt with in more detail as part of the next TMP update. However, unfortunately, TMP updates do not provide the public with very effective opportunities to comment on specific road projects. Thus we would like to take this current agenda item as an opportunity to raise a number of what we believe are important items that are essential for the committee members to be aware of regarding this proposed project and to give them due consideration in the context of the upcoming TMP revision.

We are also aware that one aspect of the template for an environmental assessment includes a needs assessment for a project. Since many of our comments are related to this needs assessment we thus believe it is appropriate to highlight these issues at this point in time even though for some reason no information related to the needs assessment appears to have been included in the materials made available for your information this meeting.

B. Needs Assessment Comments

We would like the Committee Members to note in particular our concerns related to the following three issues:

1. Project timing, particularly in relation to Trillium Line Expansion
2. Effectiveness of the project and Cost/Benefit Issues
3. Demand Projections vs Actuals

1. Project timing, particularly in relation to Trillium Line Expansion

One of the things that makes this road expansion unique among such projects in Ottawa is that it nearly exactly parallels the planned investment in extending the Trillium line both geographically and from a timing perspective. Although we understand from the EA that projections call for the need for both projects by the 2031 timeframe it is quite another matter to contemplate expanding both of these projects in such close proximity

timewise to each other. A road expansion that shortens commute times by 10 minutes will have a big impact on the potential attractiveness of transit as an alternative. Widening the road prior shortly before the transit expansion may have big implications for the effectiveness of the transit investment. What would make a lot more sense is to expand the transit first, allow its benefits to be realized and then to subsequently expand the roadway if and when actual conditions continue to demonstrate the need.

Furthermore, we would like to suggest that the expansion of the Trillium line be accelerated as much as possible by decoupling it from the broader Stage 2 O-Train project. Why should this important and necessary transit expansion to the south continue to be subjected to the delays and complications in design, funding, and tendering of the rest of the East-West LRT project which is 10x larger in cost and complexity?

2. Effectiveness and Cost/Benefit

There are some additional challenges to the effectiveness and the potential cost/benefit of the Airport Parkway/Lester Rd widening project that need to be seriously considered. Firstly is the risk that some of the gains in reduced congestion on the Airport Parkway itself are offset by increased congestion elsewhere in the network. Although this is a risk with any road expansion project, it is particularly acute in this case in terms of the impact on the congested Bronson corridor north of the canal.

We are aware that the project team completed simulations which concluded that in 2031 an extra 600 vehicles/hour (approx +33% vs today) would use the expanded Parkway but that this would result in only 30 additional vehicles/hour (+2% vs today) present on Bronson north of the canal. It is well known that a very significant percentage of trips on the Parkway today do also continue on to Bronson North of the canal and so intuitively it is difficult to understand the results of the analysis done to date.

If even 200 of the 600 additional vehicles in the peak hour that travel on a widened Airport Parkway do in fact continue on Bronson north of the canal, the impact on increased travel times through that section of Bronson will be quite noticeable and it will impact all of the other commuters (of whom there are many) who use that corridor today but who are not Airport Parkway users. Such potential increased congestion will also inevitably lead to a considerable increase in cut-through traffic in the Glebe and Old Ottawa South seeking to bypass the increased congestion on Bronson.

So for this reason, as well as because the 91m\$ cost of the project is considerably larger than the typical road widening in Ottawa, we should as a City be especially clear on the what exactly would be the net benefits system-wide of this project relative to its costs. Such kind of cost/benefit analysis has not been attempted to date.

3. Projections vs Actuals

Lastly, it should be recognized that the need for this project is based on projections of future travel demands in this corridor. In recent years there are numerous examples of how actual traffic demand growth has been less than anticipated (eg. interprovincial traffic, Altavista Corridor). In light of these trends, it is important to ensure any future decision-making around the needs for this project take into account actual trend data. The need for this project is quoted as being driven by (a) growth in Riverside South and Leitrim areas; (b) growth in airport traffic from 4.6m passengers/yr in 2014 to 7.6m passengers/yr in 2034 (2.6% annual growth rate); and (c) growth in airport industrial lands.

With respect to (a) these 2 southern communities although growing represent only about 16% of new household growth outside the greenbelt. Thus it may be that growth pressures are higher in other parts of the City and decision makers will need to be sure that this 91m\$ road investment is being optimally used when targeted at southern areas of the City.

With respect to (b) the Airport has reported that passenger growth was -2.3% in 2013, .83% in 2014, and .85% in 2015. Over that 3 year period the compounded growth then was -.2%. Three years does not make a long term trend however it is evidence enough that this topic should be revisited before any clear decisions can be made about project need.

Finally, with respect to (c), the recently released City of Ottawa Vacant Industrial Land report indicated that there was no expansion at all of industrial projects land use in the airport industrial land over the previous 2 years.

C. Suggested Response

The above highlight that there are a number of reasons why the Airport Parkway/Lester Rd widening is unique among proposed City of Ottawa road widenings (parallels a planned mass transit line expansion, size/cost, potential downstream impacts, weak growth trends relative to other parts of the City). Meanwhile, the potential implementation of this project is also still some years away. This provides the City with the justification and opportunity to put in place a monitoring program where real, on-the-ground measurement of volumes and congestion can be trended over a number of years and used as an important input into any future decisions regarding the need/timing for implementation of this project. The City typically does not tie project implementation timing to validation of the assumptions made as part of these Environmental Assessments. In an era where funds available for road funding continue to be in short supply, the importance of confirming project need many years subsequent to the initial EA approval would be a welcome innovation in the City's road capital planning processes.

D. Summary

It is particularly important in the case of the Airport Parkway/Lester Rd widening project to make a sound evidence based decision on the timing and viability of this project. It requires a level of data gathering and analysis that is beyond what is typically performed during a normal city-wide TMP update process. Implementation remains a number of years in the future and the City has an opportunity to develop a data gathering framework that can provide the kind of information that should be used in justifying a 91m\$ capital expenditure especially when recent evidence shows that growth is slowing, development charge revenues are declining, and much more rapid growth is happening in other parts of the City. This combined with the risks that doubling the capacity on a road that parallels a new mass transit line could have on impairing the benefit of that transit investment make it all the more important to ensure the right decision is made.

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Chair: Transportation Committee, Action Sandy Hill