



Road construction proposals could face speed bumps

by Richard Gilbert Jan 26, 2015

The City of Toronto is proposing a series of measures that are designed to speed up major road construction projects and unlock traffic congestion, but construction leaders are cautious about the new initiative.



"It is infinitely more complicated than it first seems," said John Mollenhauer, president and CEO of the Toronto Construction Association.

"There are a bunch of things that will impact construction and we have to spend some more time with the city working out the details a little more carefully so that it doesn't drive construction costs up and deter investment."

When construction is undertaken on sewers, watermains and major roads it can cause significant disruption to traffic, cyclists, pedestrians and commercial operations.

For this reason, a motion was passed by the Public Works and Infrastructure Committee on Jan. 6, 2015 to use an extended schedule for work hours on City of Toronto construction projects. It will be considered by city council on Feb. 10, 2015.

The committee recommends a series of measures should be implemented to reduce traffic disruption on construction projects within the municipal right-of-way.

The first proposed measure involves allowing construction work to take place 24 hours a day and seven days a week for expressways, major roads that are not close to residential areas and roads where the project would disrupt TTC streetcar service.

"The public concerns about noise are still going to be an issue for certain projects, because almost anywhere you are in the city of Toronto, you are really close to a residential area, unless you are in a fully industrial zone," says Andy Manahan, executive director of the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario**.

Mollenhauer agrees.

"The problem with noise is that it is always a test of reasonableness," he said. "Contractors try their best not to disturb the public in every respect, but we can't have a world without construction and we can't have construction without noise."

Longer hours means projects get finished faster and the disruption to traffic and local residents ends sooner.

However, it is the issue of noise that has resulted in construction activity currently being restricted to the hours between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., unless there is an emergency.

Another issue with overnight construction work is the impact it will have on labour capacity.

"As it relates to longer working hours, of course it theoretically diminishes the workforce," said Mollenhauer. "There are some folks that won't work at night, but as long as there are some that will, then longer hours is a good thing."

According to Manahan, in certain trades, like crane operators and pipelayers, there is already a shortage of labour.

"There are instances already, where some of the crane operators are working a double shift and not getting enough time between shifts, which is a safety concern for them," he said.

"In terms of sewer construction, some of the pipelayers could have issues with extended hours depending on the project."

More importantly, Manahan and Mollenhauer argue that overnight construction will increase the capital cost of projects well beyond the 20 per cent premium the city would be willing to pay for labour and materials in order to reduce traffic disruption.

Manahan and Mollenhauer both say their members estimate that in some cases there could be a shift in capital costs as high as 40 per cent.

"The last thing anybody wants to do is add cost to construction," said Mollenhauer.

"We are trying to grow our city and investment will be driven away if we do anything that pushes construction costs up. One of the reasons contractors think the premium will be considerably higher is that concrete and asphalt plants are not open at night."

In addition, he said that if a 40 per cent premium is built into the cost of construction that fewer infrastructure projects will be undertaken.

As a result, Manahan says the city needs to be very cautious about moving forward with overnight construction hours. Instead, he recommends construction hours should be extended to allow work to begin at 6 a.m.

Other measures being proposed to speed up construction and reduce traffic congestion include: improving public awareness and education about city-led construction projects; exploring the use of incentive-based contracts in construction contracts; and working to improve the utility locate process with utility companies and Ontario's Ministry of Consumer Services.