

TORONTO STAFF REPORT

April 17, 2001

To: Planning and Transportation Committee
From: Commissioner of Urban Development Services
Subject: Extension Of Highway 404

Purpose:

This report is in response to a request from the Planning and Transportation Committee regarding Provincial plans to extend Highway 404.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

There are no financial implications from this report.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that City Council:

1. Through its representation on the Greater Toronto Services Board (GTSB), press for a review of the Province's announcement concerning the overall expansion of the 400-series highway network within the context of a regional growth management strategy for the GTA based on "smart growth" principles;
2. Request the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO) to keep both the City and the GTSB informed of and involved in all planning studies on Provincial highway expansion projects in and around the GTA; and
3. Forward a copy of this report to MTO, the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) and the Regional Municipalities of York, Peel and Durham.

Background:

On March 1, 2001, the Province of Ontario announced a series of planning initiatives to expand the Provincial expressway system in and around the Greater Toronto Area. These planning studies will look at:

- extending Highway 427 further north,
- extending Highway 407 further east,
- extending Highway 404 further north and establishing a Bradford By-pass,
- providing additional capacity at the Windsor-Detroit border crossing,
- a new east-west corridor in the GTA, and
- a new mid-Niagara peninsula corridor.

A conceptualised map of these highway expansions accompanied the Province's announcement and is reproduced as Map 1 of this report. The Highway 404 Extension appears schematically on Map 1 as part of a new highway arching northwards across the top of the GTA region.

Responding to the Province's proposals, the following motion was put forward at the March 26, 2001 meeting of the City's Planning and Transportation Committee:

“Whereas the Province of Ontario has announced its intention to extend the 404 Highway north of Newmarket; and

Whereas it has been proved that throughout the world a creation of new highways creates additional traffic that would not otherwise be generated; and

Whereas the extension of 404 will facilitate the development of low density urban sprawl on the Oak Ridges Moraine and the agricultural areas to the north; and

Whereas the extension of urban sprawl will result in additional automobile traffic clogging the roads into the Greater Toronto Area;

Therefore be it resolved that the City of Toronto is opposed to the extension of Highway 404; and

Be it further resolved the City of Toronto requests that if the Province is to proceed with the extension of Highway 404 the City of Toronto is hereby requesting a full scale environmental assessment and hearing to address the following issues:

1. The alternatives to Highway 404 including an expansion of the public transit system; and
2. That any such environmental assessment examine the advisability of imposing tolls on any extension of Highway 404 to minimise the impact on the taxpayers in the GTA and to discourage commuter use on any extension.”

The Planning and Transportation Committee requested the Commissioner of Urban Development Services to report on the above-captioned motion to the Committee's next meeting on May 7, 2001.

Comments:

1. Geographic Context and Planning of Highway 404 Extension

The existing Highway 404 originates as the Don Valley Parkway in the City of Toronto and stretches north from Highway 401 to Davis Drive in the Town of Newmarket. It passes through the Towns of Markham, Richmond Hill, Whitchurch-Stouffville, and Aurora. It also traverses the Oak Ridges Moraine in the area of Richmond Hill and Aurora. The last extension of Highway 404, which brought its terminus to Davis Drive in Newmarket, was completed in 1989.

When the Province first proposed extending Highway 404 to meet Highway 12 to the northeast in Durham Region, the Regional Municipality of York called for a three-phased staging of the extension:

- Davis Drive to Herald Road,
- Herald Road to Ravenshoe Road in Keswick, and
- Ravenshoe Road to Highway 12 in Durham Region.

The Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO) began its EA study of the Highway 404 Extension in 1993, completing it in late 1997. It examined the proposed extension of Highway 404 from its current terminus all the way to Highway 12. The Provincial announcement of March 1, 2001 refers to the extension of Highway 404 north of Herald Road and noted that the EA is with the Ministry of the Environment for approval. This proposed undertaking consists of approximately 43 kilometres of new four-lane divided highway with controlled access, and is estimated to cost \$222 million.

In 1996, York Region completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the construction of the new east-west Green Lane/Herald Road (one concession north of Davis Drive) which included the first stage of the northerly extension of Highway 404 to Herald Road. These projects have been approved by the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) and are now being constructed, including the 2 km first stage of the Highway 404 Extension (see Map 2).

2. Status of Highway 404 Extension Approval

MTO's EA study is an Individual (or Full) Environmental Assessment Study. The Ministry of the Environment (MOE) is currently reviewing the environmental assessment study report (ESR). Upon completing its review, expected shortly, MOE will be filing a public notice of completion for a period of 30 days during which time its review document (or "blue book") of the ESR will be available for public viewing. Comments from the public and stakeholders on the "blue book" must be submitted to MOE during this 30-day period. MOE staff will then consider the comments received and incorporate them, where appropriate, into their recommendations to

the Minister of the Environment. It is then up to the Minister to make public his decision on the project.

MTO is also conducting another study to address operational improvements between the north and south junctions of Highways 12/48 in the Region of Durham where the Highway 404 Extension will end. This study has been modified to take into account the findings of the planning for the Highway 404 Extension. Recognizing the physical link between these two projects, MTO has suggested the following condition be applied to the approval of the Highway 404 Extension:

“Construction of the Highway 404 Extension north of Green Lane (Herald Road) may not occur until MTO has secured environmental clearance for the Highway 12/48 Environmental Study Report.”

3. Issues

First, it should be noted that the Highway 404 Extension is being subjected to a full EA and is now in the late stages of the approval process. The 30-day review period of the MOE’s “blue book” will not provide sufficient time for staff to prepare a report back to Committee and onto Council for a formal City response. Further, under the established EA process, any response to the “blue book” has to be limited to the issues raised in that document.

It should also be noted that Highway 404 already traverses the Oak Ridges Moraine and the proposed extension will push into the rural areas beyond the moraine. Undoubtedly, the Highway 404 Extension will encourage further urban development in these rural areas and, indeed, the planned growth of such centres as Holland Landing, Sharon, Queensville and Keswick is predicated on the new highway being in place. These centres are, generally, beyond the City of Toronto’s commutershed.

The MTO’s EA for the Highway 404 Extension was designed to address the problem “... of a deficiency in the capacity of the transportation network in northern York and Durham regions to accommodate forecasted commuter and recreational travel needs” (page 36). “Non-roadway alternatives” were not considered as “reasonable” options and, therefore, were screened out of the EA process at an early stage. Consequently, it is not now possible to introduce transit alternatives for consideration at this advanced stage of the EA process. The issue of imposing tolls to fund the Highway 404 Extension was also not examined in the EA process.

A disturbing aspect of the Highway 404 Extension and the other recently announced expansions to the 400-series highways (see Map 1) is the fact that these major transportation investments appear to have been made without reference to a comprehensive growth management plan for the GTA region. These highway expansion proposals need to be assessed within a regional planning context and should, at a minimum, be referred to the Greater Toronto Services Board (GTSB) for review and comment. The GTSB is currently developing a transportation plan for the GTA based on “smart growth” principles. A major thrust of the GTSB’s current proposals is to develop Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) as a key element to meet future travel demands and increasing

the use of transit. It needs to be shown how expanding the region's highway network will reduce auto dependency and help create a more sustainable pattern of growth and development.

Further, with the expansion of the 400-series highways being funded by Provincial sources while transit improvements have to be borne on the property tax base, there is a very real possibility that the expansion of the highway system will occur in advance of any substantial improvements to the region's transit systems. The threat of such an unbalanced transportation investment program will exacerbate rather than assist efforts to pursue a "smart growth" strategy for the region.

Conclusions:

This report describes the proposal to extend Highway 404 north of Newmarket to Lake Simcoe. A full EA for the proposal has been completed and is now at the final approval stage. There is little opportunity for the City to comment meaningfully on the Highway 404 Extension in terms of the EA process. However, this particular highway extension needs to be looked at in broader terms as part of the whole 400-series highway expansion program and this program, in turn, must be assessed in terms of how it contributes to the development of a growth management strategy for the entire GTA region. The GTSB is currently developing a transportation plan for the region based on "smart growth" principles and the City, through its representation on the GTSB, should seek to ensure that an evaluation of the Province's highway expansion program is incorporated into this regional planning exercise.

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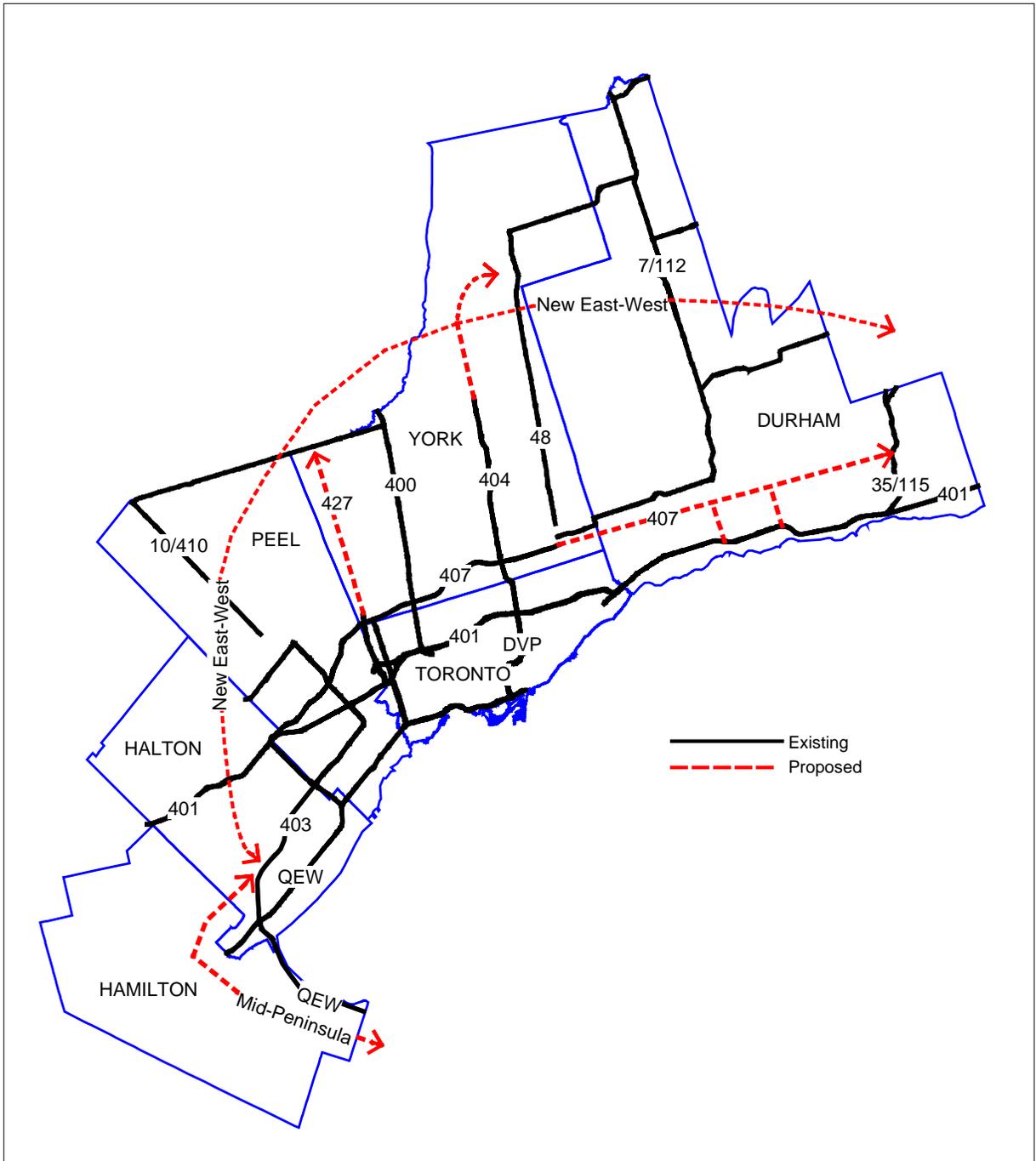
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List of Attachments:

[Maps 1 and 2.]

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Map 2
Proposed Highway 404 Extension

