

GTA West Corridor studies going too slow, Region believes

By Matt Bradley

The Ministry of Transportation (MTO) commences stage two of the Environmental Assessment (EA) for the GTA West Corridor this week.

The second stage aims at choosing a preferred route for the 55-kilometre corridor set to link Highway 400 in the east with Highways 401 and 407 in the west. The completion of stage two is expected in three to five years, but that is far too long for many Peel Regional councillors.

Concern within the Region was brought to the forefront during last Thursday's council meeting. Many councillors expressed worry that land currently under study for the new highway would remain frozen for another three to five years, halting much needed economic development.

Caledon Councillor Alan Thompson voiced his disappointment.

"We have site plans and building permits ready to be issued," he commented. "I am really devastated that we are only this far."

Thompson's sentiments were echoed throughout the chambers. Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri urged MTO to fast-track the EA process by first identifying where the highway would cross the Credit and Humber Rivers. There are only a few options at these pinch points, so the decision could be made with greater expediency. According to Sprovieri, this decision would narrow the range of the highway's possible routes and free employment land for development.

The Senior Project Manager at MMM Group Limited, Neil Ahmed, agreed that determining pinch points can be made with greater expediency, but reminded council that the proposed highway, including its several interchanges, must be strategically placed with respect to different stakeholder and community interests. Public consultation with such groups is meant to ensure that those affected by the proposed corridor are given a voice. However, the nature of public debate serves to prolong the EA process.

Project Engineer Natalie Rouskov insisted that the Ministry is taking into account the concerns expressed by council, and expediting the release of employment land where reasonably appropriate.

"Through a phased approach throughout the length of the study, we (MTO) are releasing objections to developments within the study corridor at appropriate times with public consultation," Rouskov stated. "That's something we don't (normally) do, but it is in response to the concerns that we have heard."

As stage two progresses and the Ministry narrows in on a preferred route, employment land will incrementally be made available for development as appropriate. Nevertheless, there remains the concern that the release of employment lands will be delayed too long. Ahmed suggested that the first round of such releases will unlikely occur before the first Public Information Center (PIC), scheduled for the winter of 2014-15.

Petitioning MTO to move the PIC to an earlier date seems a likely first step for council as they encourage a more efficient EA.