RECOMMENDATION A LOCUST HILL BYPASS

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RECOMMENDATION: A LOCUST HILL BYPASS

May 21, 2024 - updated Jack Heath

INTRODUCTION. In the recent Ontario budget, there was an announcement that the province was planning to widen Highway #7 in the east end of Markham from two to four lanes. Depending on the route selected, it could negatively impact the hamlet of Locust Hill (LH) and Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP).

A BYPASS MEANS TOURISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. There are two very important reasons for Markham, York, and Parks Canada to work with the provincial government for a bypass of Locust Hill when widening Highway #7 east of Donald Cousens Parkway (DCP).

The first is that the residents of the historic hamlet don't deserve the havoc and disruption of a four-lane highway through their midst.

The second is that many of the tourism and economic development opportunities the two municipalities and Parks Canada have been working towards for north of Steeles, as outlined in the draft 2022 Memorandum of Understanding between the three parties, would be negated. We developed a package for The Gateway (aka: The Central Node) which takes in east Cornell. It would have tourism draws including:

restaurants, bars, park-service stores, offices, and a hotel,

a Parks Canada Welcome Centre,

the hamlet of Locust Hill with an ice cream shop or two and B & B's, and

an activity area which the Mayor called 'Milne 2' with family activities like picnics, trails, and excitement.

Markham Planning has done work on this, especially east Cornell. It will be an interesting place to visit again and again, but its cachet will be lost if a 4-lane highway destroys LH and takes a big bite out of the package.

BACKGROUND. The draft MOU signed by Parks Canada in 2022 with Markham and York speaks to widening of Highway #7. The document remains confidential, as Markham and York have yet to formally approve it, but the MOU does raise the importance of the three parties working together if / when the widening of Highway #7 is announced. As negotiator, I was certain the widening was inevitable, although it is coming sooner than expected!

BENEFITS OF A BYPASS. There would be major benefits for the three parties in working with the

province on widening – if it includes a bypass. A four-way package might be possible. The following are some of the benefits plus some of the implications. In no order:

IMPROVEMENTS TO HIGHWAY #7 FROM DONALD COUSENS PARKWAY TO REESOR. This DCP section is partially 4 lanes now. I am uncertain who owns it. York's Commissioner of Public Works Laura McDowell will know. East of Reesor is provincial for sure. If this 250-metre section is Regional, then it is possible that the province may contribute some or all the funds needed. If provincial, it will be part of the project.

IMPLICATIONS OF WIDENING. It's important to not lose sight of the fact that the widening east of DCP is not needed to fill a Markham transportation gap. I am 99% certain that it is not in the Region's 10-year transportation capital plan. The increased capacity benefit rests almost completely with Durham and its growth. But it's a good move and I am pleased Ontario is doing it.

I believe there is enough road allowance to build a tight but acceptable four-lane highway on the current roadbed through LH. With little expropriation. I haven't seen property maps recently, but the boulevards seem extensive enough to add a lane on each side. York Region engineers should confirm. But the result would be devastating to the people living there, as well as to the rural community in east Markham, and to the park which surrounds LH. To see how such arterial roads tear the heart out of a hamlet, look at Woodbine Avenue south of 16th as it goes through Buttonville, another of Markham's heritage hamlets. It was widened to 4-lanes a few decades ago.

The beneficial result of a bypass would be that the hamlet is no longer on a major highway. It probably would be accessed by a cut-off which starts near the bridge over the Little Rouge. Perhaps the whole street picks up the name, 'Locust Hill Lane' (presently a short cul-de-sac off the current #7 east of the hamlet). The street numbering would work! The parties should discuss this.

THE WELCOME / VISITOR CENTRE. Markham and Parks Canada have discussed and generally support a visitor centre at the northeast corner of Reesor and #7 as something we should work toward. Note: Parks Canada uses the term, 'Welcome Centre;' the phrases may have slightly different meanings, but working on the MOU, we didn't get into that. Issues about capital and operating costs are part of the mix. It would be the centrepiece of The Gateway in Markham. Any facility would be smaller than the one near the Toronto Zoo but would be an important tourist draw.

There is a heritage home at the northwest corner of the same intersection which may need to move with widening and intersection construction. We previously talked of asking the developers on the west side of Reesor in Cornell to pay to have it moved – sometime in the future? If it must move, why not move it now to the designated Welcome Centre location to become the initial component of a visitor centre? Throw in basic refurbishing. It should be in the construction budget. This needs to be discussed soon.

THE REESOR CAIRN. The Reesor family has a heritage cairn on the same property as the proposed Welcome / Visitor Centre. It may need to move for the widening. I have spoken to a few Reesor's about

this and feel they would agree if it were to another location of prominence on the property. But we can't move it twice! Parks Canada and Markham need to confer further with the Reesor family and each other about the design of the centre with this in mind.

ROUNDABOUTS. Now is the time to consider the most important two intersections in The Gateway becoming roundabouts. This has surfaced previously. Highway #7 and DCP, and Highway #7 and Reesor. Highway #7 should have priority at each intersection of course. They would be memorable aspects of the visitor experience and a way to demonstrate to everyone, especially those driving on #7, that the area is special. The parties should consider the same for Highway #7 and York Durham Line, and the Little Rouge bridge too - the local road to LH would be a cutoff.

WIDENING OF STEELES EAST OF NINTH. The elected official behind much of this is Minister Paul Calandra, the MPP for Markham-Stouffville. His riding includes most of RNUP in York Region north of Steeles. Highway #7 widening is in the Ontario 2024 budget – the credit goes to him and good on the provincial government. Mayor Scarpitti congratulated him, and I have too. But widening of Steeles is as inevitable as #7. This issue should be raised with the Minister – "We support your efforts but what about Steeles?" Widening could result in less traffic on other roads in the park. Especially 14th which would have the greatest negative impact on RNUP of the three east-west arterials if all were widened. Mr. Calandra said last year that the province may need to assist Toronto financially to kick-start the project. He's right. Could the provincial intervention save York significant dollars east of Ninth? For sure, it could be a savings for Durham Region as, someday, they may be asked to match York Region's offer to Toronto to pay up to half the costs for Steeles widening (Durham for east of Ninth and York for west of Ninth to Markham Road). The approval process for this section is moving so slowly through the City of Toronto. Two decades and counting. Ontario's financial assistance should finally get us into the construction phase.

I mention a necessary, because of safety issues, pedestrian / cyclist bridge in my book, "Markham, York and RNUP, Thoughts on a Future Together." To cross over Steeles just east of Reesor and connect trails in Markham with those in Toronto. It's all about tourism. Working with Paul Calandra, we should ask the province to keep the approx. $2 million in mind as Steeles widening approaches!

UNDERSTANDING THE LANDHOLDER'S AGREEMENT. The 2014 LA anticipated important infrastructure projects in the future needing to take a small amount of land from the park. The clause was a guarantee to the province and municipalities prior to the transfer of their land that RNUP would not be a barrier to improvements in essential GTA infrastructure. Without this guarantee, no transfers would have happened. The #7 widening is one of these projects. There is not a very good understanding in York and Markham of how Parks Canada approves and allocates requests for land to be taken from the park in these cases. Even if the widening follows the current route, it will need a small amount of land. A bypass may need 10 to 30 hectares - just a guess! But, unless I am mistaken, the land would be free although return benefits to the park surely will be raised. This will be the first major use of the L.A. Does Parks Canada have the right to refuse an application if they don't like the details of the project being proposed. I

don't think so. The general purpose is easily supportable, but the details? More negotiations? Does it make a difference if a significant amount of land in a bypass scenario, some of the old #7 route, will not be needed and can be added back to the park? The parties to the L.A., Parks Canada, York, Markham, and Ontario will need to get together on this process ASAP.

Two points should be added. Widening to four lanes can be done two ways, down the centre of Locust Hill or with a bypass. If further widening is required a decade or two from now (parts of Highway #7 are already 6-lanes west of DCP), and unless we crazily think levelling Locust Hill in the future is a good idea, the logical choice years from now will be to widen the new 4-lane LH bypass today. You could say, 'Build a bypass now because, sooner or later, you'll have to build one anyway.'

The second point? There will be opposition to either option. The L.A. is not well known among the public. Turning farm and / or environmental land into a provincial highway is a sure-fire way to get a negative reaction, although the option of widening through, and doing irrevocable damage to, a heritage hamlet would be difficult for opponents to endorse as an alternative. The province, as the proponent, will need to have its traffic data in order - no widening is not an option. Durham Region's long range transportation plans will take centre stage in these discussions. I have seen them, and they are well argued about the residential and business growth coming to the area. Widening should have been done years ago.

MARKHAM'S VISION FOR THE CENTRAL NODE. During the MOU negotiations, Field Superintendent Omar McDadi and I had many back-and-forths on the Central Node concept. It is just an extension of RNUP's The Gateway and includes privately held development lands in Cornell east of DCP and north of the 407. Markham's Planning Department worked on this over several years. The landholders will have an interest in the widening and how much land will be taken from them. With compensation, of course, although these costs might be avoidable with Markham's planning help. The plan is for mixed use with a sizeable residential component.

Markham proposes an iconic pedestrian / cycling bridge over Highway #7 about 50 to 100 metres east of Reesor Road – the start for those trails that begin at the Welcome / Visitor Centre and go south and east. The idea found great support. Even then I raised the point that we should anticipate a 4-lane overpass. I hope this bridge plus the one mentioned in #6 above over Steeles, and a few others for DCP, have a standard design and distinctiveness. An RNUP feature for Markham and York! The province should pay for this one on Highway #7 in the Central Node. Two million dollars? Markham's Cornell Sub-Committee, with Councillor Keyes in the Chair and Parks Canada continuing as a member, will need to meet on the widening and how it fits with the plans developed by the city and landholders. The province should attend.

RECREATION PLANS WILL BE NEGATIVELY AFFECTED THE MOST WITH NO BYPASS. Both Markham and Parks Canada have given much thought to recreational aspects of the Central Node, a concept which could extend eastward to include the hamlet and the open lands east of Locust Hill to York Durham Line and south to the 407. A map is attached. Markham has been interested in this area as an activity centre since the mayor amusingly talked about 'Milne 2' almost 15 years ago! He was 'bang-on.' No organized sports but not just trails either. Activities of interest to families with some 'urban' flair to

match the third word in the name of the park. Markham's proposals are meant to acknowledge RNUP's proximity to Canada's largest urban centre and our many new Canadian communities. The work on specific activities was not complete at the signing of the draft MOU and remains confidential. Funding would be a major issue for such possible benefits as the welcome/ visitor centre, an activity hub, an arts and education centre, and campgrounds.

Little of this would work with a four-lane highway down the middle of LH with trucks and commuters speeding by at 60 or 80K. During our discussions, Parks Canada spoke of the hamlet being an historic attraction with B & B's, an ice cream parlour, etc. That won't happen. Markham suggested a trail for pedestrians and cyclists from the south side of #7 at the foot of the iconic bridge going east over the Little Rouge bridge and then through Locust Hill to an activity area. RNUP trails are already popular even today. To stay away from the four-lane road, we can easily divert the first section between Reesor and the Little Rouge bridge to the south somewhat. But what family or weekend cyclist is going to enjoy being a metre or two from a 4-lane provincial highway as it speeds through Locust Hill? Here, there's no other option for the trail.

THE RAIL CROSSING. A bypass will require a new rail crossing. This is the historic Havelock Line which starts near Peterborough. Its southwestern end, including the portion through RNUP, has been rumoured as a part of the line for the proposed 'bullet' train connecting Montreal and Toronto. ALTO. Stations come with surface parking for commuters. Not a good match with the hamlet - the bypass would be better suited. Whether a bullet train would stop near LH is anyone's guess, but a future GO line would. And that too has been mentioned. Ottawa may consider an overpass or underpass. For safety purposes, they like level crossings to be as close to 90 degrees as possible and that may be difficult here.

Regardless, there must be a pedestrian and cyclist crossing in LH of the rail line and the road which today is Highway #7. And the current crossing must remain viable for vehicles. Parks Canada's main north-south trail reaches Highway #7 near this point and an underpass may be a good solution. A model can be found in Port Union where a trail goes under the GO and Via lines to the lake. Or ALTO. Some of these costs should be part of both projects.

There are other complications with a bypass:

First, the four or five homes and businesses on Locust Hill Lane to the east can't be left stranded. Or those on the current #7 just east of the railway. Connecting to the outside world through Locust Hill would be a good option. If so, intersection improvements at the lane and the current Highway #7 should be part of the project even if a bypass is chosen.

Second, Markham has offered the historic Locust Hill Railway Station to RNUP if a suitable site on or near its original location can be secured. It is presently being exhibited at the Markham Museum. The museum might consider operating it as an extension – not discussed in any detail though. Its old site in LH was some 40 metres north of Highway #7. I have corresponded with Parks Canada about holding the location for this purpose.

Third, the cost. With a bypass or not, the widening of the Highway #7 bridge over the Little Rouge, or its replacement, will be in the 10s of millions of dollars. And so will anything but a level crossing for the Havelock Line with either a bypass or in the hamlet.

If I am not mistaken, this widening is part of a highway improvement project that may stretch from DCP in the west to Brock Road in the east. Several kilometres. But I stand to be corrected! I would be surprised if the first shovel in the ground occurs before 2026, with another two to three years needed for completion. [Note: my prediction has fallen behind already] Dealing with traffic will be horrible for Locust Hill residents and for RNUP too, even for a bypass, what with construction vehicles, commuters, dust, and noise. Widening through the hamlet will make it even more difficult for the residents.

GREEN RIVER. This hamlet is in Pickering just east of York Durham Line. It straddles #7 in the same fashion as Locust Hill, but it is not surrounded by the Park as is LH. There will be a political outcry by residents if one of Locust Hill or Green River gets a bypass but the other doesn't. In both cases, my uneducated engineering eye sees a bypass going north of the hamlet. Green River is closer to the proposed Pickering Airport, and a northern bypass would better serve the airport if it became a reality – which is not likely. [Note: it was cancelled in early 2025] Such a bypass would mean that the intersection of the new Highway #7 with York Durham Line would likely be 100-150 metres to the north. But I'm not actually a transportation engineer!

RESTORING THE NIGHSWANDER HOTEL. Markham remains upset about the deterioration and ultimate loss in a severe storm of this heritage building at the east end of LH. It was owned by the province as was the small house to the west. The province practiced 'demolition by neglect.' Successfully so far – they have not been held accountable. The province should build a replica or at least agree to fund one later. It used to have a huge, sheltered verandah for people to get out of the rain. It would be perfect for a summer office for the activity area, an ice cream and fast-food stand, and a larger than usual B & B. It would also be an excellent location for a Provincial Parks kiosk. A lovely park attraction. The smaller building need not be replaced, although Heritage Markham should be consulted on all of this.

FLOODING IN LOCUST HILL. This issue should not be forgotten - whichever route is selected for a widened Highway #7. Some work has been done in the past few years about irregular spring-time flooding for two to four properties on the north side of #7. I have heard that the homeowners are still not satisfied. The former TRCA lands to the north of LH, now part of RNUP, used to flood and sometimes overflow into the yards of these houses during wetter-than-average springs. Old drainage sewers exist on the north side of #7 but are not adequate. They should be upgraded whatever route is chosen. A special effort should be made to solve this issue once and for all under the auspices of the widening proposal. The TRCA should be consulted as well.

RESDENTIAL OPPOSITION. If the province decides to widen through the hamlet, they will hear from LH

residents and others in the rural area. Quite vocally. Markham and Parks Canada will get an ear-full too. The reason for such a decision could be cost; a bypass is likely more expensive. Markham has dealt with the issue of widening a road through an existing hamlet more than once. Often, there was no bypass option, but there's one here. Places where we built a hamlet bypass include Main Street Unionville and Box Grove north / south. Places where we didn't include Buttonville and Box Gove east / west. If the province makes the decision to go through the hamlet, we should insist that water and sewer service to the private property line be provided for LH residents. At no cost. The connection would be to services in Cornell to the west. One resident issue may be loss of property values; Markham should consider rezoning LH houses to include light commercial and retail as was done in Box Grove.

CONCLUSION. There's a start on why Parks Canada, York and Markham need to have discussions on the announced widening with the province ASAP. Getting out ahead of the project would be wise. Understanding the provincial Environmental Assessment process will be important. People with a larger role to play in achieving a bypass will be: with some more recent changes, Mayor Scarpitti and Councillor Keyes in Markham, as well as Councillor Nathan and the Regional Councillors, Chair Emmerson at the Region, the Field Superintendent at RNUP, and senior staff with all three organizations. And most importantly, Minister Calandra.

I am optimistic. If I can be of assistance, feel free to call. Thank you.

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