
Subject: Niagara Escarpment Crossing Update

Report to: Public Works Committee

Report date: Tuesday, June 16, 2020

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- At the July 9, 2019 Public Works Committee Meeting (Item 7.2), Niagara Regional Council requested an update on the Environmental Assessment (EA) for Regional Road 14 (Bartlett Avenue), in the Town of Grimsby also known as the Niagara Escarpment Crossing EA.
- Niagara Regional Council Strategic Plan identifies facilitating the movement of people and goods as objective 3.4 of the Responsible Growth and Infrastructure Planning priority.
- The Niagara Region Transportation Master Plan (TMP), approved by Regional Council July 2017, recommended the long-term transportation infrastructure requirement for implementing a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing (NEC) transportation corridor.
- In 2018, Transportation Services retained the services of an Environmental Assessment consultant to provide guidance related to alternate EA processes that could be used to plan the Niagara Escarpment Crossing including: Municipal Class EA and Individual EA (IEA) processes.
- The Consultant IEA alternative process review and subsequent meeting with Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) staff (2018) indicated that an IEA is the best process for projects like the Niagara Escarpment Crossing that have potentially a large environmental impact, property acquisition and high potential for stakeholder concerns.
- In 2019, Transportation Services completed the Niagara Escarpment Crossings Traffic Operations Study that identified short-term operational and safety recommendations and the requirement for a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing.
- The 2020 approved budget available for this project is \$2.5M and Transportation Services plans initiating the IEA Terms of Reference Study Q1/Q2 2021.
- The IEA process for a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing can take upwards of 3 years to obtain MECP approval which includes approved IEA Terms of Reference

(approximate 1-year time line) and the preparation of the EA Report (approximate 2-year timeline).

- The planning, EA approval, detailed design, property acquisition, funding, and construction activities required for implementing a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing transportation corridor is a complex undertaking that can take upwards of ten years.

Financial Considerations

The Niagara Region Transportation Master Plan (TMP), as approved by Council in 2017, provides the direction, policies and infrastructure improvements to address planned future growth and increasing travel demands to move people and goods within and through the Region to the 2041 planning period.

The TMP implementation strategy includes undertaking the Planning and Environmental Assessment studies associated with major transportation infrastructure projects including the Niagara Escarpment Crossing.

The 2017 Capital Cost estimate for the Niagara Escarpment Crossing (Bartlett Avenue Extension to Mud Street) identified in the 2017 Development Charges Bylaw (DCB) is \$38.7M which represents a one-third contribution by Niagara Region with the remaining Capital Costs to be funded by Federal and Provincial funding programs. The 2017 DCB identified approximately 85% of these project costs as eligible for development charge funding.

The initial estimated total project Capital Cost of approximately \$116M remains as the basis of the current DCB. However, due to additional information regarding archeological / indigenous peoples' impacts within the corridor study area, the overall project Capital Cost is estimated at approximately \$150M. The EA process will confirm the transportation system need, preliminary design, and refined construction cost estimates that can be incorporated into AMO and ROMA presentations and briefings with the Minister of Transportation Ontario.

As mentioned in the key facts section of the report, \$2.5M is currently available of prior approved Capital Budget to undertake a detailed EA for the Niagara Escarpment Crossing Project.

The implementation of identified TMP strategies/projects and the associated EA approval process, public and stakeholder consultation, property acquisition, and financial planning associated with major transportation infrastructure programs can take

upwards of ten years prior to implementation. Therefore, Niagara Region has initiated a work plan with prior approved budgets to start the planning and approval process in Q3 2020 to meet the following objectives:

- Provide the transportation services to address the forecast increase in population and employment by 2041;
- Confirm and protect transportation corridor location;
- Refined Capital Costs for financial planning of Capital Budgets and Development Charges;
- Implementing Council Strategic Priority – Facilitating the Movement of People and Goods;
- Complementing Economic Development Strategies that require efficient transportation infrastructure for Trade, Employment, and Tourist initiatives; and,
- Developing partnerships with Federal and Provincial Agencies for planning, funding, and constructing major transportation infrastructure.

Limiting or deferring approved work plan related to the Niagara Escarpment Crossing impacts delivery of Council Strategic Priorities, Economic Development Strategies, and Funding Strategies.

Currently, the estimated construction costs associated with completing the Niagara Escarpment Crossing project are not included in the Niagara Region 9-year capital forecast, as completion of the project is dependent on external funding support from Federal and Provincial programs.

Analysis

The Transportation Master Plan included substantial public consultation to establish a strategic vision for Niagara Region transportation including:

- Integrating transportation and land use;
- Maintain and improve the efficiency of the goods movement network;
- Develop a realistic and innovative blueprint for implementation; and
- Support economic development.

Along with forecasted population and employment growth of 36% and 31% respectively, travel by motorized vehicles is anticipated to grow by 55%, reaching more than 10 million vehicle-km daily in 2041. Future growth and increasing demands to move people

and goods within and through the region will intensify the need for a safe, connected and sustainable road network. Strategies and initiatives to influence how, how much, when, where, and why people travel and technologies to maximize the capacity of the existing transportation system work hand-in-hand with proposed capacity improvements.

A number of transportation system constraints exist along the major Provincial and Regional corridors that traverse Niagara, and at key locations, such as the crossings of the Niagara Escarpment and Welland Canal. Therefore, a program of strategic network capacity improvements is required to meet the needs of Niagara Region residents and businesses. The recommended TMP 2041 Road Network identified the Niagara Escarpment Crossing as a critical transportation corridor providing new transportation system capacity within Niagara Region.

The following discussion provides an overview of existing issues, planning and supporting studies related to a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing transportation corridor.

- Existing Regional Road crossings of the Niagara Escarpment in west Niagara Region include:
 - RR12 – Mountain Road - Grimsby
 - RR18 – Mountain Street – Beamsville
 - RR24 – Victoria Avenue – Vineland
- Truck volumes, driver behaviour and travel routes across the Niagara Escarpment have resulted in safety and operational concerns raised by the public and Municipal Councils.
- In response to the safety and operation concerns, Niagara Region has undertaken and been a participant of the following planning studies related to a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing transportation corridor:
 - 1997 – Niagara Crossing Study
 - Park Road Corridor noted as preferred route for new Niagara Escarpment Crossing
 - 2011 – 2016 Niagara Crossing Environmental Assessment Study

- Recommended Extension of Bartlett Avenue / Park Road Corridor to Mud Street
- 2017 – Niagara Region Transportation Master Plan
 - Reaffirmed the need for a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing
- 2019 - Niagara Escarpment Crossings Traffic Operations and Safety Study
 - Long-term recommendation for a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing
- 2019 – Town of Lincoln Transportation Master Plan
 - Long-term recommendation for a Niagara Escarpment Crossing (Park Rd. – Bartlett Avenue-QEW)
- 2020 – Greater Horseshoe Transportation Study (ongoing)
 - Assessing the need for additional transportation infrastructure in Niagara Region to accommodate movement of people and goods. Niagara Region staff, as part of study consultation phase, has provided the Ministry of Transportation with TMP 2041 network recommendations including the Niagara Escarpment Crossing transportation corridor.
- The assessment of opportunities to improve the existing safety and operational concerns and future needs of efficient movement of people and goods have identified the need for a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing transportation corridor.
 - The 2016 Niagara Crossing Environmental Assessment Study confirmed the need and corridor limits that would be included in undertaking the next phase of the Environmental Assessment process.
 - The 2017 TMP incorporated the proposed Park Road Corridor as the location of the new Niagara Escarpment Crossing.
 - The 2019 Niagara Escarpment Crossings Traffic Operations and Safety Study identified the long-term requirement for a new Niagara Escarpment Crossing
- In 2018, Transportation Services retained the services of an Environmental Assessment consultant to provide guidance related to alternate EA processes related to planning the new Niagara Escarpment Crossing. This review identified the advantages, disadvantage and risks of applying the Municipal Class EA and Individual EA processes. A summary of this review follows:

- The Municipal Class EA is the most appropriate EA process for planning projects that deal with reconstruction or widening of existing linear paved facilities not used for the same purpose / road capacity and construction of new roadways that do not have potentially large environmental impacts and/or high potential for stakeholder concerns. The Municipal Class EA process allows public and stakeholders the opportunity to submit a Part II Order to MECP regarding the EA process undertaken. The Part II Order process requires mediation of issues prior to MECP approval that can be time consuming with significant costs.
- The Individual EA (IEA) process is the most appropriate process for projects that have a potentially large environmental impact, potential for significant property acquisition and Stakeholder concerns. The Individual EA process goes through a formal government review and approval process that includes MECP approval for the Study Terms of Reference. The MECP approved Study Terms of Reference may have specific conditions and monitoring requirements that will be included during the detailed design and construction phases. The IEA follows a formal government review process, and does not provide for a Part II Order process.
- In 2018, Regional Staff met with Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) to discuss alternate EA processes to address the complexities of planning for a Niagara Escarpment Crossing. MECP staff indicated that both EA processes could be applied to the Niagara Escarpment Crossing project. However, the IEA process is the best process for projects like the Niagara Escarpment Crossing that have potentially large environmental impact, property acquisition and high potential for stakeholder concerns.

Alternatives Reviewed

Do-Nothing

- This alternative does not meet the objectives of the Transportation Master Plan or the 2019-2022 Council Strategy Implementation Plan.

Defer the Environmental Assessment Process

- Impacts of deferring the Environmental Assessment Process include:
 - Risk of no Funding Partnerships / Programs
 - Increased Costs - Public and Municipality Community / Land Use / Property

- Restricted Financial Planning - Capital Works Budgeting / Development Charges
- Limiting Goods Movement Strategies / Economic Development Programs
- Not meeting Council Strategic Priority – Responsible Growth and Infrastructure Planning
 - Facilitating the Movement of People and Goods

Proceed with Environmental Process

- Benefits of proceeding with Environmental Assessment Process include addressing concerns for:
 - Improved safety for residential areas and downtowns
 - Improved transportation system redundancy
 - Alternate transportation route access to International Border Crossing
 - Connecting Smithville to Grimsby GO Station and QEW corridor
 - Improved efficiency of Commercial Vehicle logistics
 - Enhanced Financial Planning - Capital Budget and Development Charges

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The implementation of the Niagara Escarpment Crossing corridor will provide efficient movement of people and goods within the Niagara Region transportation system that has redundancy and is resilient to future needs.

A planned and implemented efficient transportation system supports the Council's 2019-2022 Strategic Priority - Responsible Growth and Infrastructure Planning:

- Facilitating Movement of People and Goods

Other Pertinent Reports

TSC-C 3-2017, May 30, 2017, Niagara Region Transportation Master Plan

PW 27-2016, May 10, 2016, Niagara Escarpment Crossing Transportation Study

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Niagara Escarpment Crossings Traffic Operations and Safety Study