

June 28, 2000

REGION OF YORK NINTH LINE WORKING GROUP

REPORT

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First of all, thank you. Over the past several months, the Working Group has received extensive information and guidance from regional and town staff and we gratefully acknowledge their time, commitment and expertise.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

What is the future of Ninth Line?

The recommendations of the Ninth Line Working Group are a response to the Region of York's proposal to widen Ninth Line to five lanes; they are presented as an honest and logical approach to the question, bearing in mind all the issues involved. We believe strongly that this is not simply a traffic problem; other considerations are equally valid and must be brought into consideration. At the same time, we should not minimize the traffic issues in east Markham, nor disparage attempts to solve them.

We are very encouraged by the Region's planning for the Markham Bypass and believe that it is in everyone's interest to complete this road as soon as possible in order to achieve its overall purpose of "bypassing Markham." The Region's efforts to advance the completion for various stages of the bypass are commendable and we trust they will see their commitment through to a successful conclusion.

As has become clear from the work of Markham's Vision 2000 Task Force, transportation is a major issue across the Town. One of the more important findings was that residents in existing neighbourhoods feel a lack of attention by planning and engineering authorities. In the case of Ninth Line, we have a classic example of the convergence of these issues - community interests pitted against those of individual homeowners and organizations, the questionable impact of rapid development, a perceptible loss of environmental amenities, increasing traffic infiltration into existing neighbourhoods, and the potential for conflict between nearby neighbourhoods.

The Working Group is committed to solving the problem in the best interests of all stakeholders; with this in mind, we respectfully offer the following recommendations:

1.1. NO MORE THAN FOUR LANES. Because of the residential nature of the street, we recommend that any future widening be restricted to a maximum of four lanes with no continuous left turn lane. The five lane "freeway" concept should be shelved.

1.2. COMPLETE THE BYPASS DOWN TO THE 407 FIRST. Before any improvements are made to Ninth Line, we recommend that the Markham Bypass first be completed from Highway 48 north of Major MacKenzie down to the 407 and traffic patterns assessed after completion. This will also allow time for construction of the new Ninth Line sewer to be finished prior to any widening. Rather than some portions being two lanes, we recommend that the Bypass should be constructed as four lanes from Ninth Line to the 407.

1.3. BUILD THE BYPASS FROM THE 407 TO STEELES AVENUE WITHIN THREE YEARS. We recommend that the Region and the Town redouble their efforts to build a temporary connection, or permanent bypass, south of the 407 to Steeles. At the same time, Ninth Line should be diverted to the east to go around the hamlet of Box Grove. We urge all governments to seize the opportunities presented in the Box Grove Secondary Plan to accomplish a major portion of these objectives within three years.

1.4. RECONFIGURE THE NINTH LINE / BYPASS INTERSECTION. With the bypass completed, in whole or in part, arrangements must be made to encourage traffic going to, or coming from, the north to use the Markham Bypass rather than Ninth Line. We recommend that the intersection of these two roads be configured so that through traffic from the north is diverted south on the bypass, and that for a trip down Ninth Line, a deliberate right turn is required.

1.5. LOWER THE SPEED LIMIT. We recommend that the speed limit on Ninth Line should be reduced to 50 km/h south of the Markham Bypass, and call for increased enforcement measures to ensure the lower speed limit is adhered to.

1.6. NO TRUCKS. The proper place for trucks is on the Markham Bypass; we recommend that they be banned from Ninth Line south of the bypass.

1.7. THE BEST OF LANDSCAPING. We recommend that any widening should include additional landscaping with all possible measures taken to mitigate noise effects. The Working Group does not want to see medians down the centre of Ninth Line, instead we request landscaping on the west side to compliment the special landscaping plans the town has prepared for Cornell on the east side.

The Working Group also recommends that a landscaping program be put in place which will include voluntary opportunities for homeowners fronting or backing on Ninth Line. This program would offer suggestions on ways private plantings in backyards and front yards could assist and compliment the landscaping being planned for public lands nearer the street. The Working Group believes that an immediate completion of road design work would permit an earlier start to landscape planning and activity.

1.8. LOWER THE ELEVATION OF THE ROAD. The Working Group recommends that the elevation of the road should not increase at any point south of the Markham Bypass and strongly suggests that every effort be made to lower the elevation of the road south of Highway 7 and in the portions of the road north of 7 where it is higher than nearby backyards.

1.9. THE HOSPITAL NEEDS ANOTHER ACCESS ROUTE. The Working Group is cognizant of the importance of Markham Stouffville Hospital to the surrounding community. As the community and its hospital grow, access problems will also grow. We recommend that the hospital's sole reliance on a Church Street / Ninth Line entry point be diminished by adding another access route from at least one of the south, east or north.

1.10. TWO MORE STOPLIGHTS. The Working Group recommends the signalization of the intersection of Fincham and Ninth Line be considered as well as the east collector in Greensborough.

1.11. SOLVE THE PARTICIPATION HOUSE PROBLEM FIRST. The property on which Participation House sits at the southeast corner of Church Street and Ninth Line is owned by Markham Stouffville Hospital. The Working Group recommends that the management of both facilities enter negotiations as soon as possible to secure the long-term future of Participation House. No amelioration efforts to make a widened Ninth Line tolerable to Participation House have offered a satisfactory solution. The Working Group recommends that no work should be considered until arrangements have been finalized with Participation House stakeholders, funding sources and property owners.

1.12. EXTEND BUR OAK DOWN TO HIGHWAY 7 AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

We recommend that the Town of Markham fast-track the connection of Bur Oak south to Highway 7. The same applies to Bur Oak north to 16th. Both improvements can offer extra outlets for Cornell and the hospital and diminish their reliance on Ninth Line.

1.13. LINK CORNELL TO THE MARKHAM BYPASS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

To disperse traffic more evenly, the developers of Cornell should be encouraged to build a link to the existing bypass as part of its phase 2 development plan.

1.14. BUILD THE MARKHAM BYPASS / 407 INTERCHANGE IMMEDIATELY.

The Region of York is in negotiations with SLF Joint Venture to advance the building of the bypass / 407 interchange in order to open it at the same time as the Ninth Line interchange. The Working Group recommends that every effort be made to bring these negotiations to a successful conclusion as quickly as possible.

1.15. LOCAL ISSUES AND A FINAL PUBLIC MEETING. The Working Group recommends that another public meeting be held with nearby residents to receive feedback concerning this report, as well as to obtain comments and suggestions on the localized issues outlined in section 3.3 below.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. PURPOSE. The Ninth Line Working Group was proposed by Regional Council last December, and established in January by the Transportation and Works Committee in response to community concerns over the impact of the planned widening of Ninth Line.

The group was asked to consider the proposal to widen the road from its current two-lane configuration to a five-lane cross-section with curbs and all other urban characteristics through the section from Highway 407 in the south up to the new Ninth Line / Markham Bypass intersection north of 16th Avenue. The Ninth Line Working Group is charged with reporting back to the Transportation and Works Committee on June 28, 2000.

2.2. MEMBERS. The Working Group held three public meetings in February and March. At the last public meeting a smaller committee was struck. It includes three elected officials who live close enough to Ninth Line to be considered affected residents, representatives of local ratepayer groups (Sherwood-Amberglen, Cornell, Reesor Park, Old Markham Village, and Box Grove), the chief administrative officer of Markham Stouffville Hospital, the general manager of Markham Village BIA, the senior administrator from Participation House, and a homeowner on Ninth Line at Church.

At the first meeting, Gord Landon assumed the Chair with Bob Baird chosen as Co-Chair and Councillor Jack Heath as Vice-Chair. Several meetings of this smaller committee were held to consider input from staff and traffic consultants.

2.3. NINTH LINE TODAY. The proposal from the Region, which many residents have termed a "freeway," is for four through lanes including all possible right-turn lanes plus a continuous left-turn lane. Intersection improvements are planned at Delmark, Highway 7, Church, Cornell Park, 16th and Bur Oak. Unlike major north-south arterial roads to the west and east, Ninth Line dead-ends at Steeles Avenue without connecting with the 401. Warden, Kennedy, McCowan, Highway 48 and, someday, the Markham-Scarborough Link (known as the Bypass) cross into Toronto. Because of the Rouge Park, Ninth will never be extended farther south.

More than 160 homes currently back or front on Ninth Line in the area under study. Most are on the west side. Close to 100 more homes are coming on the east side in Cornell over the next 18 months. Many of the homes on the west side are relatively close to the road and would be uncomfortably closer with a five-lane Ninth Line. Unlike the arterials listed above, there are no commercial establishments on Ninth Line, with only two community-use buildings, Participation House and an ambulance station, in this stretch.

A Montessori school for up to 120 students will open this fall on the east side north of Cornell Park Avenue. A large community park is already under construction just north of the Montessori site at Fincham and Ninth Line; the park will also serve as the playground for a public elementary school which will face Country Glen Road in Cornell. The York Region District School Board recently announced that the school will open in September 2002. The Catholic Board has an option to build an elementary school next door to the public school; it too would use the park as a playground.

2.4. BOX GROVE AND LEGACY. Immediately south of Highway 407 lies the heritage hamlet of Box Grove, which surrounds the intersection of Ninth Line and 14th Avenue. Box Grove with 100 homes, and the new community of Legacy with up to 1000 homes, will be greatly affected by any changes to the north. A secondary plan study is underway for the area between Reesor Road and Ninth Line. One of its major concepts is the diversion of Ninth Line to the east as it proceeds south to 14th Avenue - in order to bypass the hamlet. With Ninth Line just two lanes wide from Steeles Avenue to Stouffville, traffic problems in Box Grove are already serious. When, or if, the diversion will be built is anyone's guess.

2.5. THE SEWER. The widening project is significantly impacted by the Region's Ninth Line sewer expansion program which should start within weeks. The new trunk sewer will be tunneled about 35 metres below the surface and is to be constructed just to the east of the current roadway. Sewer construction will have its greatest effect on the intersection of 16th Avenue and Ninth Line. The sewer was scheduled to be completed a year or two ago, but now is projected to be finished by December 2001. This date cannot be relied upon with 100% certainty.

2.6. THE 407. The southern end of the section of Ninth Line under discussion is immediately north of the bridge being built over the toll expressway. Construction work on the extension of the 407 east of Highway 48 began in the spring and SLF Joint Venture are under contract to complete it by December 31, 2001. Because of the delay in federal environmental approval, this date could fall back to summer 2002.

At this time, some doubt remains whether the interchange at the 407 and Ninth Line will be built. Local MPP and Cabinet Minister David Tsubouchi actively opposes the intersection. For the past year nearby residents have lobbied hard to reverse the original priorities and have asked that the interchange for the Markham Bypass be built prior to the one on Ninth Line. Regional Council is negotiating a financial arrangement with SLF for both to be built at the same time. The Ninth Line partial interchange, to serve the north only, is still planned to open by 2002. Transportation consultant Nick Poulos brought evidence to the committee showing benefits of the interchange; his opinions have found support among Town and Region staff. A symbiotic relationship appears to exist between the 407 / Ninth Line interchange and widening of Ninth Line: The interchange supports the widening, and the widening supports the interchange.

3.0. ANALYSIS & OPTIONS

3.1. QUESTIONS. At the Transportation and Works Committee meeting in January, staff suggested that construction of the five-lane widening project could begin immediately after the completion of the sewer. At the public meetings held by the Working Group, many questions were raised about the timing and other important matters:

Timing – When should widening take place?

Widening - What type?

How can the impact be reduced for the close to 300 homes which back or front on Ninth Line?

How should the proximity of Participation House be handled?

What should be the configuration of the Ninth Line intersection with the Bypass?

3.2. TIMING. All available data on current traffic patterns and projections were reviewed, along with the timetables for construction of Highway 407, the Markham Bypass, internal roads in Cornell and build-out predictions for Cornell, Greensborough and Swan Lake. The impact of the proposed interchange of Ninth Line with the 407 was also considered.

The committee was told that about 850 cars per hour use Ninth Line during the peak of the morning commute and that experts believe the intersection with Highway 7 is at, or close to, capacity at that time. The group continues to be anxious about the validity of vehicle counts and where the traffic is originating from; the visual experience of many members does not seem to support a major capacity problem at present. If a problem does exist, it occurs essentially in the morning when the rush period is more compact. Across the GTA, evening commutes are more spread out now as people work longer hours and use varying routes to return home. Concerning Ninth Line, members have observed that traffic southbound for the half hour before or after 8 am is heavy with some minor delays, that the evening rush is longer and steady, but that at other times of the day, the road often comes close to being deserted.

The Working Group recognizes that traffic volumes in east Markham are rising for several reasons and that Ninth Line will require upgrading at some point to accommodate the increase. The reasons are:

GROWTH OF CORNELL. Cornell has approximately 1,000 homes in phase one; most are now occupied. Because of a lack of sewer capacity, delays in the Ninth Line sewer construction will slow new home starts for a period, but up to 1,800 more homes should be occupied by mid-2004. In the local area, Cornell appears to be primarily responsible for increased traffic on Ninth Line for one very good reason: Cornell commuters can exit only to Ninth Line; at present there is no direct exit to Highway 7, 16th Avenue or the current Markham Bypass, nor is another outlet planned in phase 2.

GROWTH IN GREENSBOROUGH. This new community, soon to start north of Swan Lake and 16th Avenue, will have about 1,000 occupancies by mid-2004. It is unclear whether the sewer delay has slowed the startup of Greensborough. The Working Group learned that commuters in east Markham are usually going south and west, or west and south, which means that a portion of Greensborough will use 16th Avenue and / or north-south streets farther to the west, thus avoiding Ninth Line altogether.

GROWTH IN SWAN LAKE. This older lifestyle community north of 16th is partly complete at present and should double in size over the next three years. The Working Group determined that few of the residents of Swan Lake were using Ninth Line during the morning or evening peak rush periods.

GROWTH IN COMMUNITIES TO THE NORTH AND NORTHEAST OF MARKHAM. Consultant Nick Poulos estimated that traffic from the north and east of Markham using Ninth Line in the peak morning hour was about equal to the commuters coming out of Cornell at present. The Working Group received little information about the developments and growth trends in Stouffville, Uxbridge, north York and north Durham which would allow us to project an impact three to five years from now. The members of the committee have enough anecdotal information however, to say that the number of commuters traveling south and coming into north Markham around 8 am on Ninth Line is significant. 'Heavy' and 'steady' would be good adjectives!

Regional staff produced a useful timeline for the Working Group. It is apparent that additional capacity will be required by about 2003-2004 to handle the above developments. With the sewer construction completing in December 2001, the extended Bypass opening in mid-2002 along with the Highway 407 extension, and a construction time for widening Ninth Line being 18 months or more, a projected date for the opening of a widened Ninth Line of early 2004 would be about right.

Of course, if the interchange with the 407 and the widening are interdependent, then Ninth Line may not need widening so soon if the interchange is not built. And surely, widening south of Highway 7 is not needed without the interchange.

3.2. WHAT TYPE OF WIDENING? The Working Group estimates that, east of Highway 48 in York Region, at least 18 north-south lanes of traffic currently exist or are in the works in the foreseeable future:

- 4 or 5 lanes for Ninth Line (see this report)
- 4 lanes for Bur Oak in Cornell (the central spine; construction has already begun)
- 4 lanes for the current Markham Bypass (already built)
- 4 lanes for the new Markham Bypass (farther east than the current one)
- 2 lanes for Reesor Road (already built)

And the above does not include the 2 lane York Durham Line!

Traffic patterns will be difficult to project with so much anticipated change. The impacts of a completed Markham Bypass and a four-lane Bur Oak running north-south through the centre of Cornell are the most difficult to ascertain.

The Working Group believes that the immediate approval of a five-lane "freeway" would attract commuters to use the route and would result in the loss of any enticement to use a higher-speed and more convenient Bypass.

Is the continuous fifth lane needed? A fifth lane for left turns probably would add a degree of safety, however, we did not receive any information as to the extent of added safety involved. Continuous turning lanes are used on many regional roads in Markham, but invariably on roads which are much more heavily traveled today than Ninth Line will be five years from now, and on roads which are commercial in nature. Highway 7 and Woodbine Avenue come to mind.

With the number of north-south lanes planned in east Markham, traffic will be well dispersed in the future. Ninth Line needs no more than four lanes.

3.3. HOW CAN THE IMPACT ON RESIDENTS BE REDUCED? Between 16th Avenue and Highway 407, Ninth Line is strictly a residential road. For whatever historical reasons this has occurred, we are now faced with this fact. It is clearly not an arterial route such as Woodbine or Warden.

Many of the considerations given to Highway 48 and Main Street Markham should be applicable here.

The main issue for Ninth Line residents is noise. Existing noise levels are already high and cause aggravation and disturbance. With increased traffic, the loss of quiet backyard time has been mentioned by many residents, and widening of Ninth Line would exacerbate the problem.

The proposal to raise the height of the road south of Highway 7 is particularly disturbing as the road is already close to one metre higher than nearby backyards in some places. Although the Working Group did not hear of any proposals to raise the road north of Highway 7, apparently there are some locations where the road there is also higher than some backyards.

With proper design work and landscaping, the road level can be lowered and the impact of noise reduced.

The main issue for residents is the significant increase in daily vehicular traffic that undoubtedly will occur on an expanded Ninth Line, together with substantially higher noise and air pollution levels, increased potential for unsafe vehicle speeds and traffic incursion into adjacent neighbourhoods.

The potential impact on residents of Box Grove is problematic. If the Box Grove secondary plan does not pass, or is delayed, then any widening of Ninth Line to the north will dump more traffic through the narrow streets of the hamlet. The Working Group did not hear any statistics concerning what portion of future Ninth Line traffic will be destined for the 407 on-ramp in the morning, and what portion would be destined for Steeles and 14th Avenues. Box Grove residents will want an answer to that question!

Several localized issues important to the Ninth Line community have surfaced in the past months. They include:

SIDEWALKS. There will be a sidewalk on the east side for most of the stretch under consideration; should there be a sidewalk on the west side north of 7?

BIKE PATHS. Can a bike path be added beside the sidewalk on the east side?

TRAFFIC PROBLEMS ON LOCAL STREETS. Traffic infiltration concerns are growing on the streets just to the west - Delmark, Senator Reesor's, Wootten Way, Rose Way, Church, Fincham, Sir Lancelot, Ramona, Tiers Gate and Larkin. Turning restrictions and other traffic calming measures have been discussed, and restrictions have already been implemented at Merlin Gate for Sir Lancelot and Ramona. Are more needed? If so, what measures are appropriate? What about through traffic from Cornell along Church?

CONSTRUCTION ISSUES. How can dust and noise be kept down during construction, first for the sewer, and then Ninth Line?

THE PARKETTE AT NINTH AND 7. Can the parkette at the northwest corner of Ninth and Highway 7 be preserved in its entirety?

FENCES. Are the fences adequate along the west side?

SAFETY OF SCHOOL CHILDREN. How can the safety of the children attending the schools soon to be built on the Ninth Line be protected?

The line from the baseball movie, "If you build it, they will come", seems to be applicable to this situation. Residents fear that if the capacity of Ninth Line is increased dramatically, traffic will fill the void. Instead, from the start, they have proposed that any work on Ninth Line should be done only after the Bypass is completed and when justified by traffic patterns at that time.

3.4. HOW SHOULD THE PROXIMITY OF PARTICIPATION HOUSE BE HANDLED? The Working Group was pleased to have two members of Participation House management on the committee. We believe the proposed widening of Ninth Line at Church Street will have an unacceptable impact on Participation House, which is one of Markham's leading care facilities and a home for more than 50 residents. The proposed widening will result in the loss of more than 30 mature trees which now buffer Participation House from traffic noise, pollution and visual impact.

Any widening across the south side of Church Street at Ninth Line would bring the road too close to this vulnerable community. Now in its 26th year, Participation House is a recognized and well-respected community-based residence and learning centre serving the needs of a wide range of developmentally disabled people. If Participation House were built today, no one would permit it to be so close to either a four-lane arterial road or a five-lane "freeway." Until Participation House is able to investigate options and plan strategically its future operation, we do not see how Ninth Line construction can commence. Arrangements need to be made with stakeholders, funding sources and property owners. There seems to be no alternative to this approach if we are to maintain appropriate living conditions for some of the less advantaged members of our community.

3.5. WHAT SHOULD BE THE CONFIGURATION OF THE INTERSECTION WITH THE BYPASS? This might be the most important question of all. It is clear that the present proposal for the intersection of Ninth Line and the Bypass will not encourage through traffic to use the Bypass. For a southbound driver, a convenient straight through onto a five-lane Ninth Line, with a left turn required if he or she wants to take the two-lane Bypass, is an obvious demonstration of the relative importance of each road. When this issue was raised at committee meetings, it was stated that any change in the intersection would require a completely new environmental assessment. Yet, if the widening does not start until after the sewer is completed, time should not be a pressing issue. The configuration chosen for this important intersection will speak volumes.

4. CONCLUSION

The Working Group has submitted a number of recommendations in section one above. We commend them to the consideration of Regional Council.

The essential question is: "When Ninth Line is widened, will it serve the local communities of Box Grove, Reesor Park, Sherwood-Amberglen, Cornell, Greensborough and other nearby neighbourhoods, or will it have a larger role?" The Working Group understands that the choices made in the next few weeks and months will decide this question for years to come. We urge our municipal governments to assign the larger role to the Markham Bypass.

We thank Council for this opportunity to serve our fellow citizens.