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CANADA

Regional councillors question Brampton's 413 boulevard dream

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Planning, politics, the economy and the environment are all colliding in Brampton. Pushing all four against each other is Doug Ford's plan to build a new 400-series route, known as Highway 413 or the GTA West Corridor, from Milton to Vaughan, through Brampton and Caledon.

Recent decisions, led by Mayor Patrick Brown and Regional Councillor Michael Palleschi, have forced the project to the top of Peel's agenda. A plan, floated by Brampton staff in the spring and endorsed by the city's council members in August, would convert the proposed highway into an urban boulevard within a large corridor in the northwest corner of Brampton.

The resumption of the GTA West Corridor's Environmental Assessment process, after the previous Liberal government in Queen's Park cancelled it, was wholeheartedly endorsed by Brampton Council in 2019, with several councillors praising the job opportunities a new highway would bring. Fierce backlash from smart growth and environmental advocates, along with opposition voiced by politicians in neighbouring Halton Region, may have contributed to a change of heart at City Hall.

Brampton councillors crystallized their altered position at the beginning of October, unanimously endorsing a motion that asked the Province to study a boulevard option through the city as part of the GTA West Corridor's Environmental Assessment process. The motion included simultaneous support of the highway and boulevard.

It confused many. How could an urban boulevard, with reduced speeds, pedestrian walkways and traffic lights at intersecting streets, be shoehorned into the middle of a 400-series highway?

Michael O'Morrow, senior issues advisor for the Ministry of Transportation, twice told The Pointer the boulevard concept is "not compatible with the Province's functional and [operational] objective for the GTA West Corridor."

Brampton staff, councillors and the consultants hired to design the boulevard concept have not explained how it would work, how it could be incorporated into the middle of a 400-series highway and how it would not create a massive bottleneck for vehicles forced to slow down to half the highway speed.

Despite the facts in front of them, Brown and his council have continued to push forward with their plan — an attempt to balance environmental concerns and smart growth with development interests and demand for goods movement through the corridor. It's a difficult tightrope to walk.

On October 22, despite the clear objections already made public by the Province, Brampton brought its vision for a boulevard to Regional Council.

It was met with scepticism and resistance. Councillors from Mississauga and Caledon expressed strong reservations, while a staff report suggested, as the Province had before, the boulevard concept is incompatible with the Region's plans.

The aspirational presentation prepared by consultants hired by the City of Brampton offered few details on costs or technical specifications. Questions from The Pointer to the consultants and City have not yielded any details.

"The highway is fully paid for by the Province and I can't see the Province kicking in any money [for a boulevard]," Mississauga Ward 9 and Regional Councillor Pat Satio said at the meeting. "While I applaud Brampton for thinking outside the box — I think that's a very smart thing to do — I just ... can't see our council supporting this, at least I can't [support it]."

All twelve Mississauga Council members also sit on Peel Region Council.

Mayor Bonnie Crombie was equally unconvinced.

"I think what you want to do here is aspirational, inspirational and it's very beautiful, I really do," she said. "But I also think you're putting the cart before the horse... I think you're rushing it, I really have a sense that you're rushing it."

A Regional staff report was more blunt than either Mississauga politician, outlining concerns with the Brampton vision. It pointed out Brampton's responsibility to plot its growth within the rules set out by the Region of Peel Official Plan, something staff say the boulevard concept fails to do.

"Based on the information received from City of Brampton staff to date, insufficient information is available to satisfy the Regional official plan policy framework at this time," the report says.

The Pointer approached the Region of Peel to ask if it opposed the boulevard. Amie Miles, a spokesperson for the Region articulated a need for further information and detail from the City, "to understand whether the Urban Boulevard concept can satisfy the Regional official plan policy framework at this time," she wrote in an email.

A letter sent to Brampton in July was more detailed. It included a range of regional perspectives on the City's plans for Heritage Heights, Brampton's last remaining undeveloped space, and the area where the boulevard would run.

The letter from the Region put Highway 413 at the heart of long-term planning for Peel, specifically its economic vision for logistics and trucking to move goods through the western part of the GTA. Several future plans are based on the eventual arrival of the highway, including road widenings, according to staff.

"The role of GTA West as an uninterrupted highway connecting with other 400-series highways is crucial for the movement of goods and an essential aspect of Peel's Goods Movement Strategic Network," the letter explains. "A segmented freeway that passes through an urban boulevard as proposed currently in the concept plan will be significantly less effective in moving longer-haul trucks."

"The proposed urban boulevard concept has a suggested speed limit of 60 km/hr which is significantly lower than what is planned for the GTA West highway," the letter says, adding it would potentially lead to "bottlenecking".

The logistics and goods movement argument is one also embraced by the Brampton Board of Trade (BBOT), which blasted the City's plans for a boulevard. An open letter, shared on BBOT's website by CEO Todd Letts in August, states Council does not share the priorities of Brampton's business community.

"One example of that is Brampton council's recent reversal of support for the GTA West Corridor highway," Letts wrote after councillors endorsed the boulevard. "Earlier this month, they voted to ask the Province of Ontario to replace the highway with a relatively slow-moving boulevard — a bottleneck that threatens the livelihood of thousands in Brampton and along the innovation corridor."

It added that "thankfully, Brampton City Council's point of view holds little sway at Queen's Park."

The issue of logistics operations is a divisive one. In Brampton, 2016 census data show 19 percent of the workforce, 61,145 people, is employed in trades, transport or equipment operations.

On one side, Peel Region and BBOT see Highway 413 as the key to faster goods movement and unlocking new employment opportunities. On the other, activists and environmentalists point to the underutilized Highway 407, suggesting the Province could negotiate space for truckers to use its lanes and save on building a new, sprawl-inducing highway with wide-ranging threats to the local ecosystem.

By supporting its boulevard concept, without standing against the highway as a whole, the City of Brampton is effectively sitting on the fence.

In the face of provincial comments dismissing the viability of the project, Mayor Brown has stubbornly maintained it is possible to support both projects. In September, he told The Pointer he did not "see any contradiction" between supporting the highway and the boulevard, despite the obvious inability of a highway design to accommodate a boulevard section in the middle.

"The response we have had from the Province is much more encouraging than the response you received," he previously said, referencing comments by the Ministry of Transportation. After Brown made the claim, The Pointer went back to the ministry about his view that the Province was "more encouraging" to him. The ministry promptly told The Pointer that nothing had changed and the boulevard concept will not work.

"We will continue our advocacy for the Boulevard option ... [PC] MPP [Prabmeet] Sarkaria and [PC] MPP [Amarjot] Sandhu, who are members of the government caucus, are helping the City with our advocacy as well. I spoke to the Minister Mulroney's office and they were very open to our proposal as well," Brown said.

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