

Council Member Motion

Notice given on: Wednesday, February 21, 2024

Meeting Date Wednesday, March 6, 2024

From Councillor Justice

Subject Proposed Trans-Canada Highway Pedestrian Overpass

Background

Rationale

Ensuring the safety of students crossing the Trans Canada Highway (TCH) to get to and from the high school has long been a community concern. In response, the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MoTI) has presented a pedestrian overpass design that incorporates long ramps and median fencing to discourage jaywalking at ground level.

However, public feedback on the proposal highlights several concerns, including that the proposed design will be unattractive, will have negative impacts on businesses in the area, and will sterilize sections of the street, resulting in an uninviting environment and a negative travel experience along the TCH corridor.

Further, it's been suggested that students and others may not use the overpass as intended (a concern raised in the February 22 Citizen editorial) due to the significant distance required to cross as a result of the long ramps. As one resident commented "By the time you cross the overpass your lunch break will be over."

An additional concern is that the design of the overpass may end up creating a focal point for street disorder - as designed, the structure is enclosed in an armature to deter crime and discourage people wanting to camp under it.

While well intentioned, the overpass proposal raises the fundamental question:

Do we want to remain a community that is physically and psychologically divided by a bleak stretch of highway? Or is there a way of addressing traffic flow and safety objectives for this section of the TCH while also creating a more welcoming and beautiful pedestrian friendly and business enhancing street environment - one that establishes a greater sense of connectivity between the east and west sides of what will be our urban core?

An overpass with a highway median fence is auto-centric and is contrary to the OCP vision of a more humanized environment. An overpass is a solution that is more typically used to bridge major highways, not a downtown or city street. And it is a solution that will reinforce the psychological and physical separation between east and west sides, exacerbating the alienating highway environment, and adding visual blight to the community.

The reality is that the TCH as it passes through our community is more akin to a major urban street than a highway. It has a posted speed limit of 50 kilometers per hour and is not dissimilar to major arterials found in towns and cities elsewhere (e.g., Blanchard street in Victoria). With more thought it could be woven into the urban fabric in a way that creates a more liveable and aesthetically appealing environment.

For example, BC Housing is currently working on Evergreen Terrace, a housing project with a main frontage on Blanchard St, a very busy arterial that is classified as a highway. The BC Housing design team has been working with the City of Victoria on a design vision to keep the traffic flow high, but also create a safe and much improved pedestrian and cycling environment through a treed setback.

There are many examples of very effective non-overpass pedestrian crossing facilities on major roads in many cities that support safety and traffic flow. Better options addressing a broader range of objectives beyond pedestrian safety and traffic flow are required - we just need to make the effort to go through a process of considering the possibilities. For example, a solution might include options for calming traffic to the posted speed and rethinking/enhancing the intersection at University Boulevard with a signalled crossing coordinated with neighbouring signals to minimally impede traffic flow.

In sum, an overpass is an inadequate solution to the pedestrian safety problem. Let us seek a solution which not only achieves safety and traffic flow objectives but also achieves other community goals like creating public spaces that people love and feel connected to and where businesses can thrive.

Policy Context

Recently, North Cowichan's and Duncan's councils agreed to request that the province work with them to update the Trans-Canada Highway Corridor Management Plan.

North Cowichan has several high-level plans which will be relevant to that update including the University Village Plan - a local area plan appendix of the Official Community Plan - and the draft Master Transportation Plan.

The policy contained in these documents prioritize creating distinctive and meaningful environments in the University Village area - an area which includes the highway corridor - by promoting compact, pedestrian focused development, reducing auto-oriented uses, as well as improving linkages across the neighbourhoods by promoting complete streets throughout the area to improve connectivity, mobility and accessibility for all users and modes of transportation.

Recommendation

WHEREAS it is Council's goal to implement the active transportation priorities and safety objectives noted in the Official Community Plan and draft Master Transportation Plan;

AND WHEREAS Council wants to ensure a more welcoming, beautiful, pedestrian friendly and business enhancing environment that establishes a greater sense of connectivity between the east and west sides of the Trans-Canada Highway;

NOW THEREFORE be it resolved that the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure:

1. be advised that a pedestrian overpass is not supported as the preferred option for pedestrian and cycle crossing of the Trans-Canada Highway near the new high school,
2. be requested to consult with North Cowichan in having Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure retain the services of an urban design firm to oversee the design of a highway crossing by a progressive transportation engineer that considers an at grade solution, with the goals of:
 - a. facilitating a downtown-appropriate active transportation connection between east and west sides of the TCH corridor,
 - b. achieving safety and traffic flow objectives,
 - c. not adversely impacting local businesses, and
 - d. being consistent with community goals of creating aesthetic, vibrant and human-scale 'complete street' environments.
3. be requested to reallocate the money that would be used for the construction of an overpass into the at grade intersection solution.
4. be requested to undertake public consultation with an at grade solution for community input."

THAT Council refer this motion regarding the pedestrian overpass to North Cowichan's regional partners, namely; School District No. 79, City of Duncan, Cowichan Valley Regional District, and Cowichan Tribes.

Attachment: