

Region of Waterloo
Transportation Services
Transportation

To: Planning and Works Committee
Meeting Date: March 7, 2023
Report Title: Lancaster Street and Highway 85 Ramp Closure Environmental Assessment Study – Recommendation

1. Recommendation

That the Regional Municipality of Waterloo:

- a) Endorse the permanent closure of both ramps at the Highway 85 and Lancaster Street interchange in the City of Kitchener as outlined in Report TSD-TRP-23-002, dated March 7, 2023;
- b) Direct staff to file the Notice of Completion of the Study and place the Environmental Study File on the public record for a period of 30 days; and
- c) Subject to final approval of the Environmental Assessment Study, forward a request to the Ministry of Transportation to include the removal of the ramps in an upcoming Highway reconstruction project.

2. Purpose / Issue:

To seek Council endorsement of the permanent closure of the ramps at the Highway 85 and Lancaster Street interchange and to provide the background, evaluation and public consultation results for the Lancaster Street and Highway 85 Ramp Closure Study.

3. Strategic Plan:

The project is directly related to the Sustainable Transportation Focus Area, and in particular, the following Strategic Objectives:

- 2.3 Increase participation in active forms of transportation (cycling and walking); and
- 2.4 Improve road safety for all users – drivers, cyclists, pedestrians, horse and buggies.

More specifically, the improvements would work to achieve the following Actions:

- 2.3.1 Continue to explore, plan and implement new pedestrian and cycling

facilities in coordination with local municipalities as per the Transportation Master Plan to provide good connectivity and close gaps in the current active transportation network; and

- 2.4.1 Continue to implement the Region's road safety program to reduce the number of severe and fatal injury collisions, using elements of engineering, education and enforcement, with a greater emphasis on reducing collisions involving active transportation users.

Recently, values and priorities for transportation systems have begun to change due to the long-term financial impacts of road infrastructure and the need for the Region to reduce the environmental impacts from Green House Gas (49% of GHG are from transportation). The Region recently approved a Climate Change Strategy that plans for over 50 percent of trips by active transportation by 2050. Supporting this goal, the new Official Plan direction prioritizes sustainable modes creating 15-minute communities.

4. Report Highlights:

- Currently, the Region is planning the reconstruction of Lancaster Street from Wellington Street to Bridgeport Road in the City of Kitchener. Please refer to Appendix A for a key plan of the Lancaster Street project limits, including key cycling connections to other planned facilities. A key need of that project is to provide a high quality All-Ages-and-Abilities (AAA) cycling and walking facility. Barriers to providing that AAA facility are the existing free-flow ramps on Lancaster Street at the Highway 85 bridge. The free-flow ramps create an uncomfortable condition for cyclists and walkers. This condition exists at nearly all of the urban interchanges in the Region and staff are working with the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) to make changes at each location to better support active transportation.
- The short section of southbound Highway 85 between where traffic from Bridgeport Road merges with the southbound Highway 8 traffic and the southbound Highway 85 traffic exiting to Lancaster Street creates a weaving section known to have a high number of collisions. This issue reduces highway speed, capacity and makes for problematic traffic operations.
- To address the challenges, two alternatives were evaluated: one that leaves the ramps as they are; and one that permanently closes both ramps. When the two options were evaluated against key criteria, including safety and the ability to encourage more active transportation, the Project Team identified the full closure of both ramps as the Preferred Alternative.
- The majority of the public who commented on the two options were in favour of the closure. Some businesses and public members were concerned with the increased travel time to access the highway at Bridgeport Road or Wellington Street and were opposed to the closure. Should the ramps be closed, the increased travel time to

current users of this interchange is estimated to be two to three minutes due to the need to access Highway 85 at alternate locations.

- Should Regional Council endorse the permanent closure of the Lancaster Street / Highway 85 ramps, and pending approval of the Environmental Assessment Study, MTO would incorporate the removal of the ramps as part of an upcoming MTO Highway 85 rehabilitation contract.

5. Background:

The current collision and volume numbers on Highway 85 southbound in the area of the Lancaster Street interchange area are shown in Appendix B. This section of highway has a less than expected safety performance and high potential for collision reduction with the closure of the Lancaster Street Ramps. The closely spaced interchanges of Bridgeport Road and Lancaster Street have a short weaving section that impacts safety performance. Under current Highway Design Standards, interchanges would not be constructed so close together if the highway were designed and constructed today. The two Lancaster Street ramps carry relatively low traffic volumes that can be accommodated elsewhere on the transportation network.

Today, the Lancaster interchange is not a full interchange and has access only to and from the north. Traffic using the Lancaster ramps today was analyzed using data that showed the general origins and destinations of the ramp vehicles. Potential alternative routes for southbound off-ramp and northbound on-ramp to exit/enter Highway 85 are shown in Appendix C.

Further analysis was completed that showed there is capacity in the future at both the Bridgeport Road and Wellington Street interchanges to accommodate the vehicles that would be diverted with the closure of the Lancaster ramps. The exception is for the exiting southbound highway left turning vehicles on Wellington Street. There are delays to this movement today and these will continue into the future. Future mitigation could be to add traffic control signals if the right turn channel were to be removed.

As part of a separate Regional project, additional improvements are proposed at the Bridgeport Road / Highway 85 interchange to facilitate the construction of separated AAA cycling facilities on Bridgeport Road. The improvements are proposed to include removal of the right turn channels on the north side of Bridgeport Road and signalization of both ramp terminals. The planned improvements would further help support alternative routing for vehicles using the Lancaster Street ramps today.

With the closure of the Lancaster Street / Highway 85 ramps and the addition of an AAA cycling facility on the bridge, Lancaster Street would be an excellent cycling route from Wellington Street to Bridgeport Road (connecting into the proposed AAA facility on Bridgeport Road going into Uptown Waterloo). The closure of the Lancaster Street

ramps would improve conditions on Lancaster Street for pedestrians and cyclists while reducing the number of collisions on Highway 85 near the ramps.

6. Area Municipality Communication and Public/Stakeholder Engagement:

Area Municipality Communication:

Staff from the City of Kitchener and MTO are part of the Project Team and are supportive of the ramp closures.

Public/Stakeholder Engagement:

The Region published an EngageWR page and survey in December of 2022 to provide staff an opportunity to listen, examine and consider varied public view points on the key issues for this project. There were over 2,900 visitors to the page with 682 surveys completed. About 70 visitors subscribed for updates to this study. An email has been sent informing them of the recommendations in this report (along with the date of the Committee meeting and how to register to be a delegation).

About 2/3 of people either support the ramp removals, are neutral or support the ramp removals with upgrades to the Bridgeport Road and Highway 85 ramp terminals (signalize).

A summary of the public input received regarding the benefits and challenges is outlined in Appendix E.

7. Financial Implications:

The construction costs for the Lancaster Street ramp closures, as recommended, will be 100% covered by MTO as part of a MTO rehabilitation project of Highway 85 in the area. This work will be done in conjunction with the Lancaster Street, Wellington Street North to Bridgeport Road rehabilitation (Project #05497).

The Region's approved 2023-2032 Transportation Capital Program included \$823,500 in 2023 and \$6,922,500 for the Lancaster Street Environmental Assessment Study (Project #05497) funded from the Transportation Capital Budget (73%, \$5,689,800), the Canada Community Building Reserve Fund (19%, \$1,500,000) and from the Roads Regional Development Charges Reserve Fund (7%, \$556,200).

8. Conclusion / Next Steps:

In summary, an evaluation was made between keeping the ramps open and closing them (Appendix F).

The Project Team is recommending closing the ramps to allow for an AAA cycling facility along with sidewalks on the Lancaster Street bridge over Highway 85 and to reduce collisions and improve overall operations on Highway 85 in the area.

The next steps for this study are;

- Subject to Council approval, file the Notice of Completion and place the Environmental Study File on the public record for a period of 30 days;
- Continue to work with MTO on the design of the highway in the area of Lancaster Street and Bridgeport Road to implement the ramp closures;
- Confirm timing with MTO for their project to rehabilitate Hwy 85, including the full decommissioning of the Lancaster street ramps, and
- Adjust the timing as necessary of the Regional contract to reconstruct Lancaster Street to coordinate construction with MTO, subject to the receipt of all technical and financial approvals, relocation of utilities and property acquisition.

Attachments:

Appendix A: Lancaster Street Project Limits

Appendix B: Collision Data on Highway 85 southbound

Appendix C: Alternative Routes

Appendix D: Waterloo Cycling Network Study Project Limits

Appendix E: Public Engagement Summary: Benefits and Challenges Identified

Appendix F: Lancaster Street and Highway 85 Ramp Closure Evaluation Matrix

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