

We could have saved millions and the need to expropriate if we had at least tried the three-lane option

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

The debate about the future of Speedvale Avenue East has demonstrated very clearly how hard it will be for this city to move into the future.

While it would be easy to characterize it as cars against bikes, or the old guard versus the dreamers, or even the left against the right, it is not as simple as that. It rarely is.

Some of the recent letters and columns in this newspaper have tried to stoke up the old “war on the car” rhetoric, suggesting this council is working with the same rationale as a certain ex-mayor of our largest city. I hope we can expect a little more than that.

No one will deny Speedvale from Woolwich east is a busy road. We don’t need staff reports to tell us that. And there seems to be no dispute about the need to upgrade the infrastructure.

The controversy comes from the need to widen it to meet modern lane standards and to accommodate the services. This will require acquiring land from the adjacent property owners.

Anyone who lives on a busy street, even if it wasn’t always a busy street, lives with the fear of an envelope arriving from city hall containing an expropriation letter. And given that in most cases, the city is really just claiming back land it has always owned as right of way, the land owner has little say in the matter. It doesn’t matter that the same person has maintained that piece of land for umpteen years, if the “public good” deems that the city needs the land, it will take it.

(In theory, about 10 feet of my front yard belongs to the city but unless they expand my little dead-end street to four lanes, I should be safe.)

A little while back, the city adopted a new policy that said that when a major road was to be upgraded, then bike lanes should be added at that time. That was a sound fiscal approach, even it meant there will be no bike lanes for years on many roads. It was a nod to a future when – and this is difficult for some folks to grasp – more and more people will be looking to other forms of transport than four wheels.

Two of the options on the table for Speedvale called for widening the street, with one option adding bike lanes; they both came in at around \$14 million.

The irony in the Speedvale case is that there is an option on the table that costs millions of dollars less than the recommended course of action – and doesn't involve any expropriation.

Now spending money has been a big issue with this mayor and some of his fellow tax-fighters, and that's fair enough. But when you cannot even get them to at least try out the cheaper option (the savings would cover almost half the cost of the Urbacon settlement) you have to wonder.

That option would have changed the street from four lanes to three lanes, including a turning lane and bike lanes. Given how busy Speedvale is, there is a real question as to what that would have done for traffic flow. My gut says it wouldn't have worked well, but how do we know unless we try it out? And to do that would have cost peanuts. It could also have provided the naysayers with a ton of actual evidence to support their fears about major congestion and fire trucks and ambulances being delayed during emergencies.

I cannot for the life of me understand why they did not want to support the trial idea. Just imagine the gloating rights they would have had when it was over and the issue came back to the council table.

Then again, maybe they were afraid that somehow people would figure it out, slow down, drive at different times, take different routes, or – finally with a safe alternative – take their bicycle instead. Maybe the fire trucks would find the centre lane was more than adequate to get through. And maybe some of those biking on the sidewalk would use the street instead and leave room for pedestrians.

But now we'll never know. I think that's a shame.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)