



Feedback on the Brantford Transportation Master Plan November 2020 update

1 message

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To the Transportation Planning Team:

Per the request on the city's webpage, below is my feedback on the Transportation Master Plan (TMP) dated November 2020. I will preface this by saying that I am not a traffic engineer, but I have lived in Brantford for 20 years. I have commuted to various workplaces in the region and I travel often from Holmedale to West Brant to visit my father at the John Noble Home. I am also a runner and cyclist, so I am very familiar with the bike trail infrastructure. While there are elements of the TMP that I applaud, I will say up front that I am very much opposed to the proposed Oak Park Road Extension (OPRE) bridge over the Grand River for reasons that I will outline below.

First the positives, I was very pleased to see the recommendations to consider a holistic view of transportation in the city which includes vehicles, transit and "active transportation" such as cycling and walking. The proposed investments in transit and active transportation are steps in the right direction and long overdue. Several other road works recommendations in the plan such as improving the Veterans Memorial Bridge crossing and working with Brant County to upgrade Phelps Road to the west are both excellent ideas that should be undertaken sooner rather than later.

So, what are the problems with the proposed OPRE project? I have provided feedback to Council and to the OPRE project team and I will summarize my key objections here again for the record:

1. Serious degradation of a provincially unique environmental area.
2. Destruction of recreational facilities such as the Oak Hill trail bridge and access to Brant Park.
3. Disturbance of the Oak Hill Cemetery.
4. Noise and disruption to existing neighbourhoods on the Colborne West side.
5. Possibility of conflict with First Nations peoples over land claims and archaeological remains.
6. Extreme cost of the OPRE to the city (including ongoing maintenance costs).

The basis for the OPRE project as stated in the TMP is the proposed growth of the city to 163,000 residents by 2041. I do understand that the traffic department did not invent that number and it comes from the 2019 version of the province's "Places to Grow" plan (although Schedule 3 of Places to Grow actually states Brantford would be 165,000 residents by 2051 – [source](#)).

Over the last 20 years the city has maintained a growth rate of approximately 0.85% ([source](#)). To achieve growth to 163,000 residents over the next 20 years, our growth rate would have to go up to 2.3% per year starting next year. In other words, our growth rate would have to be 270% higher than in the previous two decades. Absent some huge change in Brantford's economy, it is difficult to believe this is possible. By way of comparison, over the last two decades Cambridge has grown by [1.18% per year](#) and Kitchener at a respectable [1.5% per year](#). If Brantford were to remain at 0.85% per year, our population in 2041 would be approximately 120,500 and if we were to double our growth rate to something like 1.5% the city would grow to around 138,000 by 2041.

The problem then becomes, how does a lower growth rate influence the choice of projects – especially the OPRE? If the city ends up at only 120,000 to 140,000 residents, then it seems logical to assume that the other improvements recommended in the TMP could easily cope with the cross-river traffic load. We will have spent \$100 million (fully one third of the whole proposed 20-year transportation construction budget) on a single project which will end up simply providing a slightly shorter trip to the 403 for residents of a low-density suburb in the South West corner of the city. This seems like the very definition of a "White Elephant" or "Boondoggle" project – extremely high-cost infrastructure that ends up being underutilized. The TMP should include a range of options based on potential population growth scenarios.

Even if the city grows to the size projected, the TMP itself clearly states "the two main crossings of the Grand River are still anticipated to be significantly over capacity even with the addition of the Oak Park Road Grand River crossing (4 lanes) and a widening of the Veteran's Memorial Parkway Grand River crossing (2 to 4 lanes)." (pg 86)

So, even after destroying the environment of the Northwest and spending so much money, the OPRE will not solve the core strategic problem of the capacity of the two downtown river crossings. For instance, shoppers going from West Brant to the big-box retailers on Wayne Gretzky will still likely take the Lorne Bridge and Colborne Street rather than detouring backwards to take the OPRE and 403 (although they might take Phelps Road to Garden Avenue).

Another weakness in the TMP with regards to the OPRE is analysis of what traffic the OPRE is expected to handle. The document states in several places that the OPRE is supposed to divert the following traffic loads:

- Brant Avenue - St Paul Avenue to Colborne Street: 300 – 500 peak hour vehicles
- Paris Road - Highway 403 to Powerline Road: 350 peak hour vehicles
- Hardy Road - Ferrero Boulevard to Paris Road: 300 – 500 peak hour vehicles

What then is the traffic volume the bridge will be expected to handle? Would it be $500 + 350 + 500 = 1,350$ peak hour vehicles, for instance? This would then appear to make the OPRE almost as busy as the Lorne Bridge and would mean that it would generate considerable pollution and noise in the Northwest and potentially a traffic nightmare on Colborne West. The TPM must include a detailed traffic analysis for the OPRE like those provided for the other traffic corridors in the city such as the Lorne Bridge or West Street. Presumably, this is available from the city's Vissim traffic simulation software as part of the overall analysis of the city's road network.

In sum, the OPRE presents itself as a very risky and expensive project that is based on dubious assumptions. If we do not meet the growth goals set by the province (or the next provincial government changes them arbitrarily yet again) then it is likely to be grossly underutilized. However, the damage to the Northwest region will be permanent and the \$100 million hole in the budget will prevent investment in other areas. Perhaps it will be possible to achieve something like 75% of the benefit of the OPRE by investing more in transit, traffic demand management and active transportation while preserving the natural heritage of the Northwest. Overall, this would be a much better deal for taxpayers as well as the environment. Solving potential future traffic problems by building more new road mega projects looks an awful lot like city planning "old think" from the 1970s. Studies for years have found that building more roads puts more people in their cars and perpetuates the cycle of congestion.

My preferred recommendation would be to remove the OPRE entirely from the TMP and immediately stop the wastage of taxpayers' money on further studies. Failing that, I strongly recommend putting the OPRE into the more distant "2032 – 2041" timeframe from the current "2026 – 2031" mid-term so that there can be future evaluations of how the population growth of the city is evolving over the coming years. In the intervening time, we can maximize investment in the positive alternatives and evaluate how well they are working.

Many thanks for the opportunity to provide this feedback and best wishes for a safe and prosperous New Year.

Best regards,

Chris Armour