

Presentation to Waterloo City Council
July 18, 2011
Wilmot Line Hard-Surfacing

Honourable Mayor, Members of Council, and Guests,

My name is Kevin Thomason and I am the owner of 1115 Cedar Grove Road, Waterloo, Ontario just off the Wilmot Line.

For ten years now myself and hundreds of local citizens have worked collaboratively with this Council and City of Waterloo Staff to protect the Waterloo Moraine, our ground-water aquifers, our natural areas, and to create the Laurel Creek Headwaters Environmentally Sensitive Landscape – building upon the City's Environment First motto and decades of earlier environmental efforts.

The Laurel Creek Headwaters ESL, created in 2005 is a spectacular 5,500 acre natural moraine area, home to four ESPA areas, numerous provincially significant wetlands, and more than 72 rare, endangered, and regionally significant species.

It is a natural jewel – an oasis of turtles, owls, otters, brook trout, deer and countless other creatures right here within our own city limits.

Thousands of hours of time has been put into ensuring the protection and viability of this spectacular area - helping to balance the significant growth that Waterloo is experiencing and providing incredible quality of life for our citizens including pristine drinking water, fresh air, recreational opportunities, local food, and farm gate sales.

One of the most important aspects of this protection has been to limit the negative human impact in this area. Over the past decade, we have worked to repeal urban boundaries, change zoning, re-orient entire subdivisions, redesign roads and intersections, and work to ensure that urban traffic does not overwhelm this incredibly sensitive area.

In, 2003 the entire West Side District Plan was revised to eliminate any accesses to the Wilmot Line to help ensure urban traffic didn't flood onto rural roads never intended to handle the traffic from thousands of homes planned for areas near this roadway. Later, the Columbia Street extension was rerouted to avoid any connection to the Wilmot Line to further help protect this area.

(Show Ian McLean resolution)

Over the years, the City has made dozens of decisions including passing a resolution in 2004 to ensure that the Wilmot Line – a boundary road that the City shares half of the maintenance costs with Wilmot Township on and is responsible for all maintenance on from November 1st to April 30th remained gravel, in a natural state, and that all possible

efforts were made to ensure that traffic counts remained below the threshold of 1,000 vehicles per day – including potentially closing the road in the future if need be. This Council resolution also included regular traffic counts by the City to monitor the status of the road on an ongoing basis.

Despite the City's ongoing protection efforts for this area, in August, 2008 the Township of Wilmot absurdly requested the City of Waterloo pay half of the costs of upgrading, tarring, and chipping the Wilmot Line with no regards to the potential consequences.

Again, serious concerns about the safety and speeds along the road along with the devastating impact of encouraging significantly higher traffic volumes along a narrow rural road and into an environmental area where traffic needs to be reduced, not increased were brought forward again.

Thankfully, the City of Waterloo, again recognized the environmental importance of this area and made it clear in a formal letter back to the Township that you were against any upgrades to this road that could damage the ESL and would in no way, form, or manner pay the hundreds of thousands of dollars that Wilmot was expecting to pave the Wilmot Line.

(Show copy of second resolution)

The Region of Waterloo further clarified the Wilmot Line situation by making it extremely clear to the Township of Wilmot that within the ESL area where the Region had jurisdiction, any changes, upgrades, improvements, or any sort of hard surfacing was considered beyond regular maintenance and would require a detailed Environmental Assessment (EA) involving considerable public engagement, research, study, and evaluation of alternatives prior to proceeding.

Paving of the Wilmot Line

Despite all these earlier efforts, this past Thursday, area residents were shocked to find construction crews arriving to hard-surface the Wilmot Line from the Waterloo Golf Academy several kilometers north to within one foot of the ESL boundary, at the top of Horror Hill, adjacent to Councillor Peter Roe's and developer Paul Puopolo's homes.

(Show map of Wilmot Line and newly paved section)

The construction crews worked quickly throughout the day on Thursday and by Friday afternoon had completed widening the roadway by several feet and tarring and chipping it for several kilometers despite the concerns of area residents.

Being summer, it has been difficult to reach anyone. Most of our phone calls and e-mails have gone unanswered as we have attempted to learn over the past 72 hours how the

paving of this road could happen with no public process, no notice to area residents, no posted signage warning of construction, and no mention of the Wilmot Line in any Council meeting minutes from either Municipality over the past year.

We have yet to be able to reach any Wilmot Councillors though Gary Charbonneau their Roads Director told me this morning that this is just regular maintenance. He told me that the City of Waterloo Staff knew of these activities and there was no need to inform area residents.

City of Waterloo Councillors I tried to contact over the weekend and today have been shocked to hear of this paving without their knowledge or approval on a road that the City is responsible for half of the maintenance for and half of the expenses and has previously issued two extremely clear motions against this exact sort of effort to pave it.

There are so many questions at this point:

- Why was there no public process here when there has been such community involvement and high profile media attention for years of other Westside activities and issues? It certainly seems to me that someone is trying to pull a fast one here against the wishes of our community and this Council.
- How can exactly did what this Council passed two motions to prevent still happen without this Council's knowledge?
- The bill that Wilmot tried to get Waterloo to pay for half of a few years ago was over \$300,000. Who is paying the bill this time?
- In fact, if Wilmot considers this regular maintenance and the City shares half of all maintenance costs on this road with the Township of Wilmot is there a large bill coming that Waterloo taxpayers are going to be on the hook for?
- What about even just the costs for maintaining this newly paved part? The City does all the winter maintenance and this hilly freshly paved part is going to require considerable amounts of salt or perhaps even an alternative de-icer that could be far more costly than the sand that has been used in the past. Will two trucks now be needed to clear the Line – one with salt for the South half, one with sand for the Northern half?
- Did City of Waterloo Staff know about this as Gary Charbonneau, Wilmot's Roads Director claims? I can't believe that City Staff would go against Council's incredibly clear previous motions on protecting the Wilmot Line and approve the paving themselves.
- Is the City of Waterloo still committed to protecting the Waterloo Moraine and this Laurel Creek Headwaters ESL?

- Are traffic studies still being done annually on this road?
- What is the status of the maintenance agreement with Wilmot Township? I believe that it has been in progress for over four years now.
- Was this paving paid for out of development funds? Or did developers themselves decide to take matters into their own hands, override the wishes of this Council and the public to pave the road themselves?
- Who is really deciding the future of our community?

Many of you have been elected on promises to protect our environment specifically even protecting this road – how can this happen without your knowledge? So many citizens have expressed their concerns about the Waterloo Moraine and the need for better environmental protection. The Westside has been one of the highest profile and most contentious issues this City has grappled with for years.

However, the public has been clear on the need for more protection. The City has an Environment First motto. You have all worked so hard in the past to help protect this area and it is unbelievable to think that something like this could happen now and nobody know about it!

Safety Concerns

In addition to the environmental consequences of encouraging large new volumes of traffic into sensitive areas, now having to heavily salt the paved hills, and deal with the devastating salt runoff issues that have destroyed wetlands and contaminated drinking water wells elsewhere in our Region, there are the safety aspects that need to be taken into account.

This is a narrow rural road quite different than most roads in the Region. It has steep blind hills, a rough road surface in places, significant wildlife on roadway and requires different skills to drive than some drivers may be used to.

It has already seen numerous accidents, joggers and cyclists hit by speeding cars, countless cars in the ditch, serious injuries and a fatality all just in the past couple of years. I have frequently been one of the first people on the scene of awful car accidents along this road. The screams of people trapped in cars while firefighters work to free them still haunt me along with numerous bloody scenarios I have had to help out in. Each time I have to stop to assist someone who is injured or has gotten themselves into trouble I vow to do more to try to make the road safer before someone else is killed.

Increasing the volume and speed of traffic will not make this road safer.

This winter on one part of the Wilmot Line alone I counted over several weeks more than 35 cars that left the road, spun out, hit trees, became stuck in the ditch, rolled over, or needed tow trucks to get out – almost always the result of either going far too fast or being unfamiliar with rural driving. Yet, we now have a newly paved road parallel to the increasingly congested Ira Needles Blvd, leading right off busy Erb St. that is going to lure more drivers than ever into this area.

There is a serious liability issue for both the Township of Wilmot and the City of Waterloo as previous consultants reports have listed a number of concerns regarding poor sightlines, hills that needed to be cropped, speed limits lowered, etc. on the portion of the road that was just paved with none of these safety measures done prior to paving. What is the liability when an issue is known and nothing is done about it? Will the new pavement be tore up and things changed to address this?

It is not just speeding cars and drivers unfamiliar with hilly, rural roads. Countless cyclists, hikers, joggers, dog walkers, horse and buggies, and even horseback riders enjoy this rural area daily. Many people have told me the reason they moved to Waterloo was because of the recreation opportunities and their enjoyment of this spectacular area. However, given the increased speeds likely on the newly paved road, the potential for deadly accidents between drivers cresting blind hills and innocent people on the other side increases dramatically and it may only be a matter of time before there are more fatalities that we might be able to prevent now if we can come up some proactive measures.

Even the unfinished intersection of the Wilmot Line and Erb St. presents a challenge that this new paving is only going to make worse. The risk and liability of this intersection at the South end of the Wilmot Line has been known for some time and an EA for improvements sits stalled between the City of Waterloo, the Region of Waterloo and the Township of Wilmot.

It is an intersection on two hills with a blind corner where one has to pull out into traffic already doing 80km/h. The dangers here are well known and documented yet nothing has been done and now with this surprising upgrade of the Wilmot Line more traffic than ever is likely going to be trying to turn at this challenging and dangerous intersection.

Again, perhaps it is only a matter of time until we are facing serious injuries or fatalities.

We have appealed in the past for speed limits to be reduced on this road. In my entire 15 years of living off this road I have never seen any sort of policing or speed enforcement. In fact, the average response time for any sort of 911 call is well over 45 minutes still despite considerable concerns raised with the death of the Vogel's in their house fire on the Wilmot Line two years ago, our visits to Police, EMS and area Fire Services to see how we can improve cross-boundary response times.

Also, there needs to be far better signage warning of the dangers of this road, limiting it

to local traffic only, and preventing the considerable truck traffic that tries to use it as a shortcut around Waterloo or to the Landfill. Granted it was just paved on Friday, but there isn't even a sign to warn of the end of the paved road or the start of likely the steepest hill in the Region ahead.

Moving Forward

The paving of the Wilmot Line this past week seriously threatens all the work and environmental protection of the past 10 years. So many throughout our community and at all levels of government have worked to try to protect this area and ensure the best possible solutions for everyone.

It is this City's water supply and our future depends on this area – be it the existing Clair Creek water wells or the new wells currently being drilled on Conservation Drive and at the Laurel Creek Conservation Area to provide for our growing water needs. This ESL is the source and headwaters for all these aquifers and it requires all the protection that we can provide.

Perhaps ultimately the only way to protect this area will be to close the Wilmot Line entirely – forcing urban traffic back onto urban roads. There are less than a dozen homes on this road. The nearly one thousand of cars per day on this Wilmot Line certainly isn't coming from area residents. Certainly closing the Wilmot line may be inconvenient and may remove a shortcut that saved 60 seconds on someone's commute however, when are we going to start to put our environment ahead of our automobile?

The City of Waterloo may not have full control of the Wilmot Line, however it does have full control of Conservation Drive, Wideman Road, and can work with other municipalities on Kressler Road and it appears that more dialog is certainly needed with Wilmot Township too. Ultimately some of these roads may need to be closed, have traffic calming installed, or other measures to help protect this area and ensure the safety of those enjoying it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have again to ask why there was no public process on Friday's paving of the Wilmot Line and I realize this Council and Waterloo Staff may be as shocked by all this as citizens are. It just smells bad to me and looks like somebody was trying to push it through, get their way, and beg forgiveness later - without informing the public, the media, or this Council.

There are now considerable safety issues that need to be addressed and we need to figure out how we are going to reduce – not increase traffic into this sensitive area.

We need to address how this happened, figure out what options exist at this point, and ensure that we do everything possible to reduce the impact on the ESL, our water aquifers and our natural areas along with ensuring the highest possible level of safety for our citizens.

Thank you,
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