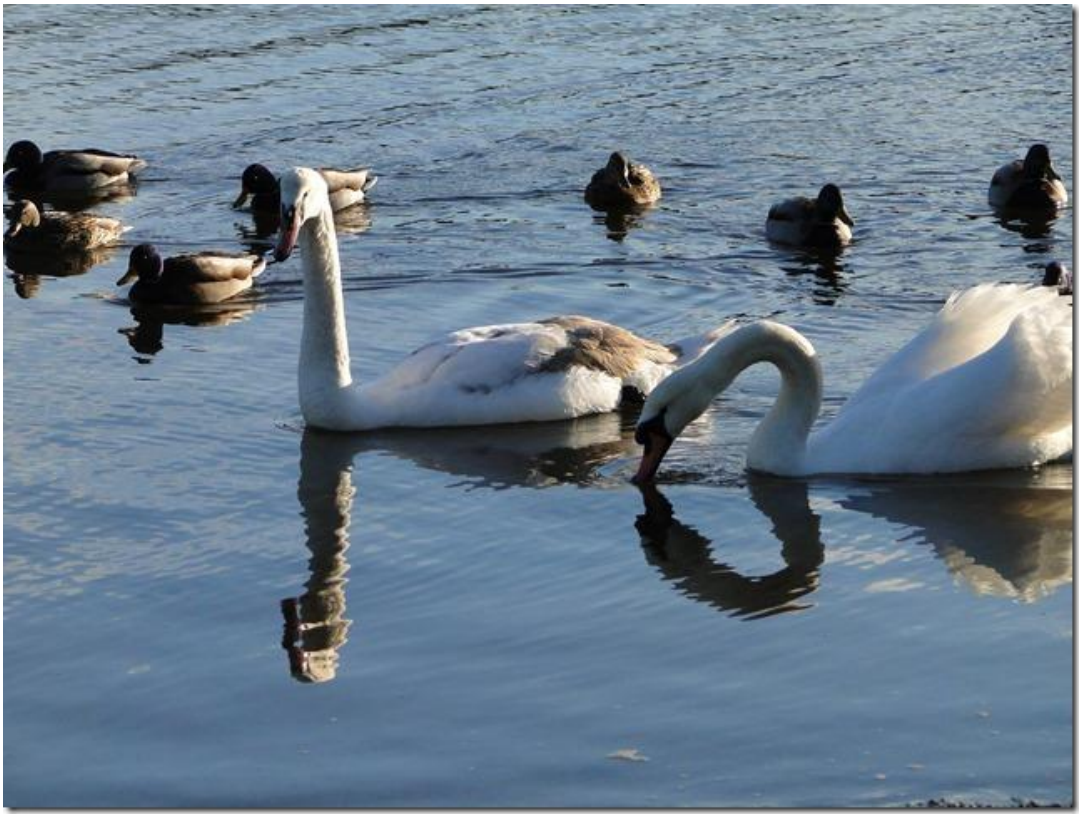
GORGE TILLICUM

Community Association

Report from the Gorge Tillicum Community Association Regarding the Proposed Interchange at McKenzie/Admirals & Highway 1



The proposed new interchange for the McKenzie/Admirals and Highway 1 intersection is perhaps the single largest public investment in transportation that has been proposed since the highway was rebuilt 30 years ago. It is of significant importance that we examine all of the potential impacts for future of the Gorge Tillicum Community. It is with great interest that we have followed and participated in the public consultation process led by the staff for the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure.

When the announcement was made last summer that $85 million was budgeted to build relief for traffic congestion and vehicle accident impacts many of us cheered at the prospect. This particular intersection has been a central part of the ongoing discussion about regional transportation issues for the CRD since the completion of the McKenzie connection to Highway 1. The prospect of influencing this project was welcomed.

The Gorge Tillicum neighbourhood is an urban community with grid streets that enjoys both the benefits of being connected to the amenities of urban living and a unique natural environment. Within one kilometer of this intersection there are 5 schools, all within walkable and cycling distances. We have over 1,000,000 square feet of retail space, two historic crossings of the Gorge Waterway with corresponding connecting roads, 3 natural area parks (Gorge Park, Gorge Waterway/Kosapsom Parks, and Cuthbert Holmes next to the highway). The Colquitz River runs through Cuthbert Holmes Park flowing into Portage Inlet. The waters from this river come as far away as Elk and Blenkinsop Lakes and all of the connected storm drain systems. The river is a significant fish habitat and flows through to a federal migratory bird sanctuary which includes all of the Gorge Waterway. We also have 3 direct connections to the highway at Admirals, Burnside/Interurban and Tillicum Roads. In a nutshell, the Gorge Tillicum neighbourhood is a very unique and special place to live.

From the very beginning of this project, the GTCA made a point of being involved. We formed a task group made of community members with expertise in engineering, environmental analysis, transportation economics, community planning, local transportation issues and regional growth strategies. This task group began from the position that we represent the community and understand the connections that integrated our neighbourhood with all the communities around us. We also appreciate that because of our location in Greater Victoria, our values to the region are very important.

The GTCA Task Group began consideration of this infrastructure investment by completing a list of issues and questions that we felt needed to be addressed when options were to be considered.

Our first question was to understand the focus of the project. The Ministry website referred to the goals to relieve traffic congestion and improve safety. Next we considered our task to represent the community, but to also inform the community about issues and offer solutions that best reflect how we connect with all the communities around us. This also applies bringing our values into the regional context. To be clear, our community is not trying to oppose this project, but rather we are trying to encourage the highest quality project that both assist in improving transportation links while respecting community values.

We expected that the CRD would be involved along with BC Transit, Saanich staff, and community associations including Mount View Colquitz, Portage Inlet Sanctuary Colquitz Estuary Society (PICSES) and Marigold/Strawberry Vale/Vanalman. We felt that the GTCA could help lead the conversations and be able to communicate with the neighbourhood seeking feedback that can assist in the task at hand. There is a great deal of expertise within every community and this project gives us a chance to engage those voices.

Our research pointed to a number of guiding documents, most can be found on various websites:

- Regional Growth Strategy/Travel Choices Strategy/new CRD Sustainability Strategy
- GTCA Local Area Plan
- Saanich Community Plan
- Saanich Sustainability Strategy
- Saanich EDPA by-law

We asked ourselves some key questions starting with: "what are the key points the GTCA would like to address from a neighbourhood point of view?" We produced 4 goals:

Goal 1: To improve traffic flow and reduce congestion

- To improve traffic flow on Highway 1 through the McKenzie/Admirals intersection
- To maximize/maintain options for current and future modes of public transportation (bus, light rail)
- To avoid increasing the amount of traffic passing through the Gorge Tillicum neighbourhood (along Admirals, Burnside and Tillicum Roads)
- To design the intersection so that traffic travelling down Admirals Road does not exceed the speed limit. Consider reducing speed limits to be compatible with Craigflower Road
- To avoid increasing the amount of traffic congestion at the Tillicum Road traffic lights

Goal 2: To improve the infrastructure for alternative modes of traffic (e.g., pedestrians, bicycles, etc.)

- To improve the Galloping Goose Trail crossing of McKenzie by creating a safe, secure, pleasant, and naturally lit (preferably not underground) crossing that is separate from traffic and able to handle large amounts of cyclists approaching from opposite directions
- To create safe pedestrian access/linkage to the Galloping Goose Trail from Cuthbert Holmes Park
- To improve the pedestrian crossings of the highway and Admirals Road re: safety and security
- To create a design that encourages active living and more children to walk and/or cycle to the three adjacent schools from the surrounding neighbourhoods
- To create a connection linking the communities/neighbourhoods across the highway for all user types (linking shopping malls, entertainment, recreation centre, parks, schools and neighbourhoods, etc. together)

Goal 3: To minimize the negative environmental impact

- To minimize the amount of land removed from what is perceived to be Cuthbert Holmes Park and replace what must be removed with comparable property
- To protect existing natural habitats, water and soil quality to the highest standards
- To restore impacted natural environment with native plant species
- Repair past dumping of fill along the highway beside the park
- Storm water treatment from all new and existing hard surfaces. Retention may be necessary as the proximity to the mouth of Colquitz River is very close.
- Respect the Saanich Environment Development Permit Area by-law

Goal 4: To minimize the social and community impacts

- To minimize any negative visual impact
- To reduce the amount of air and noise pollution currently experienced by users of the Galloping Goose and neighbourhood residents
- To avoid creating risky "hiding spots" that attract problems that already exist in the neighbourhood (e.g., tunnels that attract smokers, vandalism, drug dealers, homeless, etc.)
- To not reduce access that people in this neighbourhood have to both highways now (i.e. don't make it impossible to get onto or off of the highway from / to Admirals
- Consider the impact to surrounding residential streets when designing features
- Rehabilitating plant and tree cover on Provincial lands adjacent to Cuthbert Holmes Park.
- Relocate pedestrian overpass and/or provide parking/drop off area for vehicles dropping kids off/picking up on school days
- Sound attenuation along the south right of way boundary where residences exist or may be proposed
- Calming facilities at Admirals Road (traffic circles, narrowing's)
- Transfer land title for all properties in Cuthbert Holmes Park that are currently owned by the province to Saanich.

As we moved through the consultation process led by ministry staff, these points and others were raised. The province asked for input and received over 1,800 response in various ways. They have held two open houses and met with community representatives from all around the Capital Region. These engagements have resulted in two designs being proposed by the ministry planners and engineers. Both of these designs are based on the single option of moving motor vehicles into and out of Victoria without traffic signals at this intersection. Both designs work to mitigate transit access, the Galloping Goose trail for walkers and cyclists. They also continue to have signal lights for the left turn from the highway to McKenzie, all movements from and to Admirals and McKenzie, the left turn from Admirals north to the highway and the left from McKenzie southbound on the highway.

More information and the drawings for each design can be found at:

www.engage.gov.bc.ca/mckenzieinterchange

The focus seems to be the inbound and outbound vehicle traffic on the highway. BC Transit will be required to leave the highway, stop at one light, and then the transit stop before merging back on the highway. This similar to the transit stops at the Helmcken interchange.

Colquitz River looking north from the Dysart bridge towards Admirals

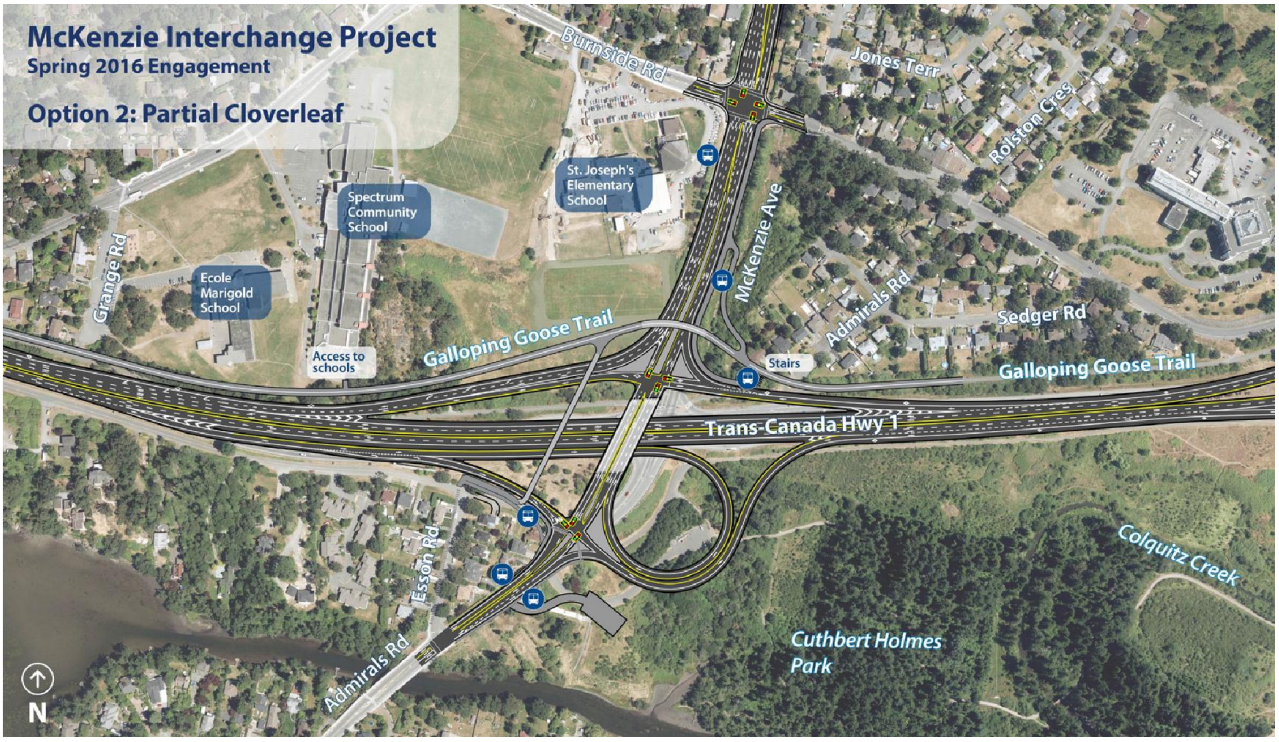
Impact on the Gorge Tillicum Community:

- Cyclists and pedestrians using the Galloping Goose Trail will be routed further up McKenzie before crossing and then back down to the original trail. The ministry says this will be no more than a 4 percent grade up and down (currently there is no grade change).

- The current pedestrian overpass connecting Portage Road to the schools and the Galloping Goose Trail will be removed to accommodate the extra car lanes needed and a new overpass will be installed closer to the intersection.

- This new overpass will be more than double the length of the current pedestrian route.

- Both options use up considerably more land than the current configuration with design number 2 actually using 1.4 hectares of greenspace. The cloverleaf design will move the interchange into Cuthbert Holmes Park and 100 meters closer to Colquitz creek and the houses along the river.



At this time, it appears design #2 is the most favoured by drivers because the left turn on to McKenzie will only have one traffic light to negotiate before the Burnside McKenzie intersection. We also understand that provision for a 2 lane merge ramp from McKenzie north to the highway is being considered.

The ministry has indicated that they will be offering to replace any land taken from the park and to mitigate any environmental impacts. At this time there has not been any detail analysis on the environmental impacts, but we have seen some suggestions about retaining ponds for storm water runoff and future tree planting along the edges of the highway to give some protection to the park lands.

There has been a sound study completed and shared with the GTCA. The ministry suggests that noise will be reduced as the two designs proposed will go under the current road grade and therefore sound will not travel as much as well as the majority of traffic will no longer be accelerating from a stop light.

The Ministry's consultation process has recently closed off public comments (as of March 18th) and is now proceeding with functional design phase with the plan to start construction late this year.

Comments and Questions from the Gorge Tillicum Community Association

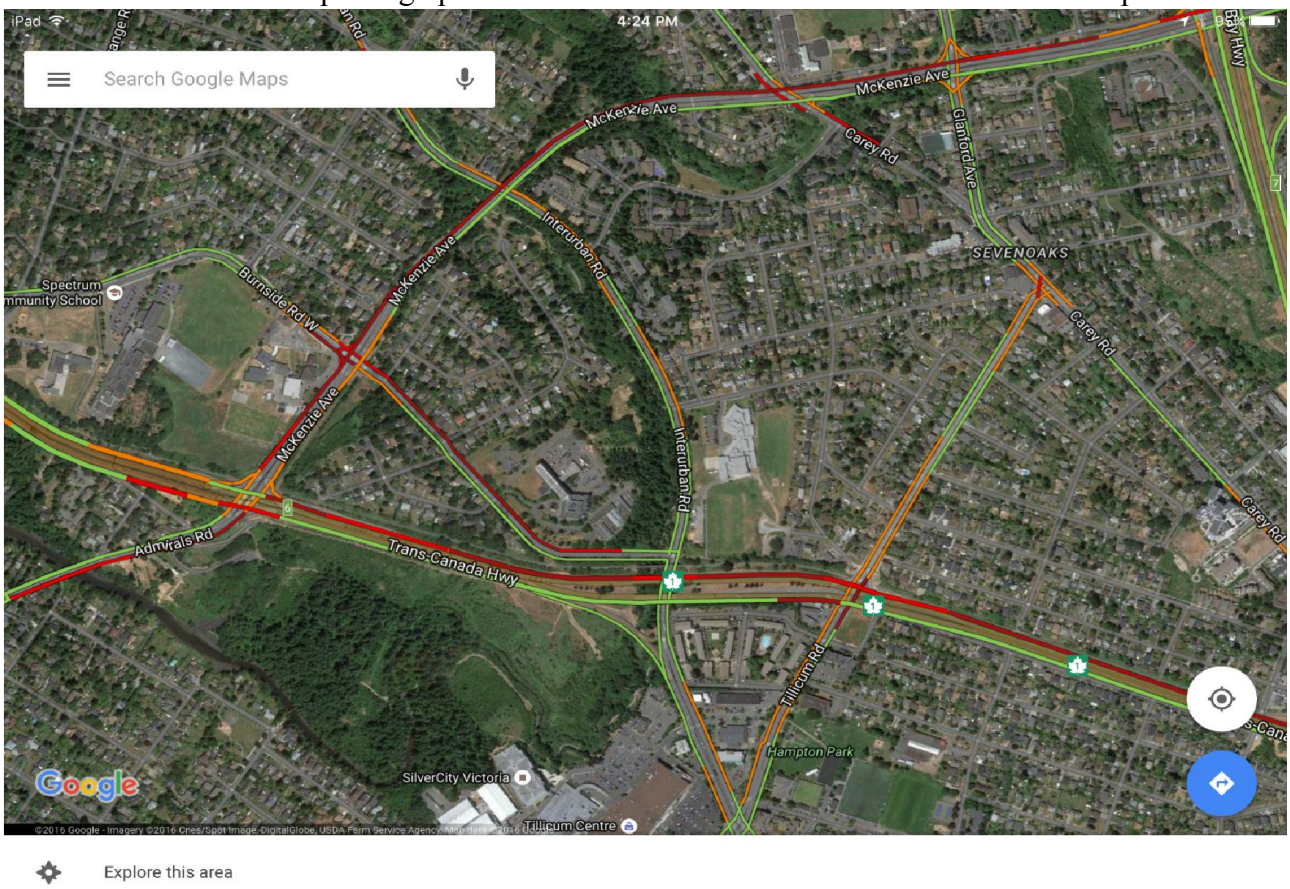
The GTCA has been actively involved in this project since the Regional Growth Strategy was developed back in 2000. We participated in the advisory committees to both the RGS and the Travel Choices Strategy. Central to much of these discussions was the corridor that included this intersection. In particular the RGS is to focus on increasing transportation mode choices and to give priority to investments in transit, cycling and pedestrian amenities. These goals came about after almost 7 years of discussion and consultations with experts on sustainable growth for urban environments.

We also have a clear understanding of the impacts of the current situation on our neighbourhood. For example, during the afternoon commute, Admirals Road can have traffic backed up from the intersection past Cowper and Inlet. This leads to frustration from residents along the route because their driveway access is blocked and the number of cars and their noise and fumes create an uncomfortable environment.

In addition, whenever there is an incident at any of the intersections (Tillicum or Admirals/McKenzie) on the highway, the amount of traffic cutting through our neighbourhood is enough to block everyone's access. The grid street layout of our community actually attracts drivers who are looking for faster ways to get where they are going.

So our interest in how this intersection investment is designed is of the highest priority. Our first question was are there other options to the single option (2 designs) presented by the ministry staff? Our answer is yes, but we need to break down the specific issues we are trying to resolve.

1. The first issue we considered is the outbound traffic through the evening commute. This can start as early as 3:00 on any weekday afternoon and continue past 6:00 pm. There are a total of 36,000 vehicles a day going through the intersection (22,000 from the Douglas corridor and 14,000 from McKenzie). If this traffic can be released from stopping at a light and be able to merge seamlessly instead of the current stop and go process then all other traffic movements would be improved.

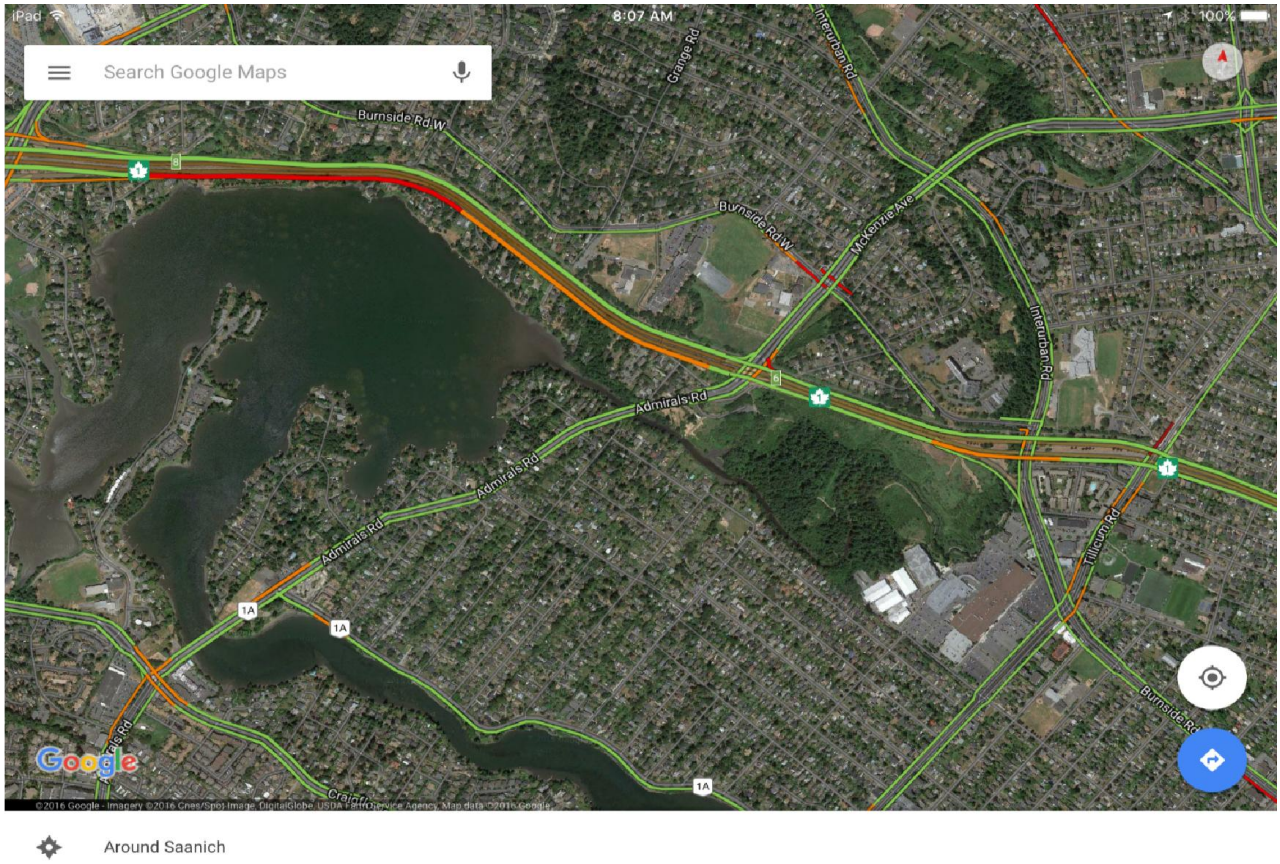


Red lines showing congestion afternoon commute

2. The third issue for this community has been the protection of the environment, especially the impacts to Cuthbert Holmes Park and the Colquitz River Estuary. There are significant concerns expressed about the amount of natural habitat that will be taken to benefit commuters.

3. Transit congestion is considered another reason to fix the intersection. As a matter of fact, the vision from the RGS is that transit would have the highest investment with the biggest potential returns. At this time, we see transit being fitted into the designs from the ministry although they do indicate that right of way for future rapid transit is being preserved.

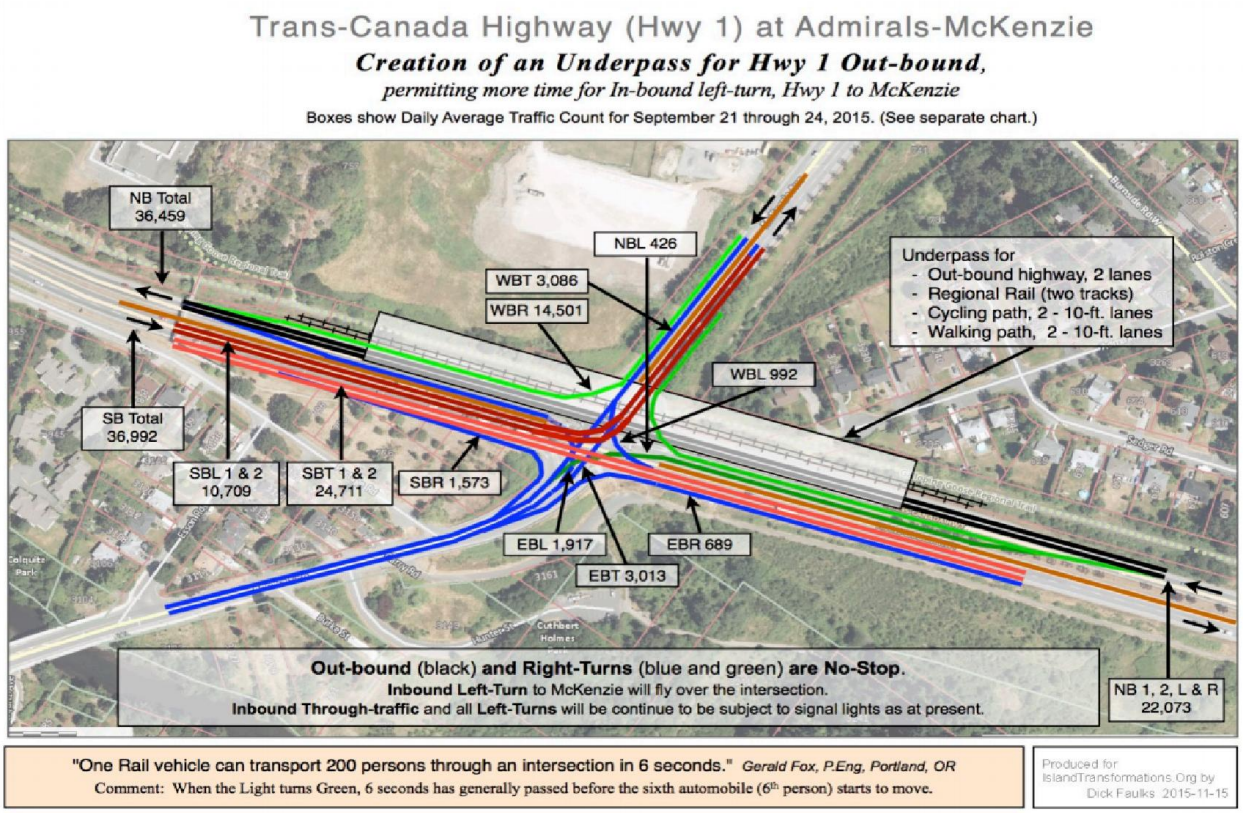
4. The fifth issue is related to suggested commute time savings: The inbound traffic, particularly in the morning commute has generated a great deal of discussion. The first question is where will it go if there are no lights at McKenzie and Admirals? It is only a short distance to the next light and judging from the number of vehicles involved, there will likely continue to be backups during peak hours. The Ministry suggests that for a vehicle traveling from the Millstream intersection to the Douglas corridor will save up to 22 minutes in daily commute time. It would be very interesting to examine that calculation carefully. Where does the time saving come from? Is it from the removing of a stop light or is it from the separation of the other vehicle movements through the intersection? This is a very important distinction as it may be able to help inform us as to what other options might work to achieve similar results and perhaps give us benefits in other areas such as protecting green space and supporting the RGS.



Morning commute

Other traffic movements, from Admirals turning on to the highway or straight through up McKenzie do not involve a significant number of vehicles, however, even a few hundred vehicles during peak hours can cause negative impacts for residents trying to access the road or their driveways. While it is expected that any redesign of the intersection will offer relief there is concern that once relief is achieved traffic demand will increase the number of vehicles choosing this route over others such as the old island highway. This is a dedicated truck route for the region so it is very important to manage any changes carefully.

Another option for the McKenzie Interchange: Below is a drawing of an option that is in many ways similar to what the ministry is proposing but is different in that it treats inbound traffic as traffic entering the urban environment but clearly gives priority to the outbound traffic and the traffic trying to connect to the Pat Bay highway giving left turn to McKenzie as a higher priority for both now and the future.



It would very useful in our analysis to model this option using the same data and assumptions that have been used by the ministry for their designs so we can make proper considerations of the costs and benefits for each. It may be true that this design provides very similar results while using less land space, fewer environmental costs, lower impacts on our neighbourhood and better preparation for the future.

The construction period will certainly result in some disruption to the neighbourhood traffic flows. It is imperative that efforts to mitigate and discourage cut through traffic.

Future Considerations

As we have come to understand the economics of transportation demand management and how the world is seeking answers to our transportation bottlenecks through innovation and technology it seems that the designs being proposed do not give serious consideration to what is possible. Once we understand the real economic benefits of a transportation system that includes driverless vehicles (health savings, insurance savings, environmental savings, emergency services savings and more) would we be better off if we actually encouraged such change? It seems like the ministry proposals are attempting to solve problems of the past under the assumption that nothing will change in the future. In fact, the car manufacturers are saying that they are no longer selling vehicle, but selling transportation systems and that the current transportation system will change more in the next 5 years than it has in the last 60.

The option we have presented above is a compromise with relief being given to outbound and highway connecting traffic while preserving the urban nature of the inbound traffic to the benefit of the natural environment and the 150 year old urban neighbourhood of Gorge Tillicum.

Recommendations

As indicated above, the Gorge Tillicum Community Association is not against investments to improve the McKenzie intersection for all users. In order to assist in this project we offer the following recommendations:

1. **What other options are there that can be modeled that do not impact the park or the neighbourhood?**

2. **Transfer the title of all the lands considered to be part of Cuthbert Holmes Park from the province to Saanich.**

3. **Reduce speed limits from 50 to 40 km/h on Admirals, Cowper/Obed, Gorge and Tillicum roads to discourage cut through traffic and to align with Craigflower and Gorge Road in Victoria.**

4. **Implement transportation demand practices especially through employers.**

5. **Use high quality technology solutions to monitor and manage traffic flows particularly for the morning inbound commute.**

6. **Develop programs that look to the future with self-driving vehicles, Uber, and other ride sharing options.**

7. **Recognize that vehicle sensor technology will do more for reducing the kind of vehicle conflicts and crashes that are occurring today.**

8. **Improve the pedestrian crossings at Admirals connecting the neighbourhood to the pedestrian overpass.**

9. **Develop an independent analysis of the impacts to the environment particularly the natural habitat around the Federal and Provincial Migratory Bird Sanctuary, the Colquitz River Estuary, air quality and noise.**

10. **Understand the role that the Saanich EDPA by-law has on this project.**

11. **Develop a Transit solution to congestion issues particularly the long awaited LRT.**

12. **Create a pleasant route for pedestrians and cyclists to cross over the TCH. This could include rockeries with trees, plants and flowers. Artwork on the railings of the overpass.**