

Welcome to Big G in conversation, the Podcast from in City Hall

Wendy King: Hi, I'm Wendy King and today we're talking the boat always Guelph disconnected by the way we move around and not just by car with your active transportation and transit hubs conducted by city streets, parks and trails. Let's get this conversation going.

Wendy King: We are talking about connecting Guelph, joining me today, Jenny Juste, manager of Transportation planning and Project lead on the Transportation Master Plan. Tiffany Hanna Park planner and project lead of Guelph Trail master Plan and Jason Simmons, Manager of Transit Operations for Guelph Transit. So welcome everybody.

Jennifer Juste: Hi

Jason Simmons: Thank you

Wendy King: So when I was thinking about our topic today I must admit it sounded kind of promising that soon will all be moving around the city again with fewer restrictions. And I know you've all got so many plans but Jenny just to start us off. In what ways has the pandemic affected your work?

Jennifer Juste: Ah well, it's been an interesting time in transportation for sure. I think when they were looking at transportation planning, it's more of the long-range policies and master plans that my team typically looks at. But we also look at sustainable transportation. So in my group, you know, once the weather started warming up after the beginning of the pandemic, there was a demand for people to want to get outside and use the trails and biking and walking around to the city more. And we wanted to make sure they could do that safely, so we were able to mobilize our colleagues with public works and our transportation engineering friends to design some closed lanes that would widen sidewalk space and allow for trail users and pedestrians to occupy a bit more space and and social distance a bit better.

Jennifer Juste: So we decided to continue that this year as well, because it was such a success in certain areas and, you know, for example, the Speedvale Ave Bridge, we have a lane closed in one direction and we're seeing over 600 pedestrians and cyclists a day using that space. So it has been helpful I think to people who are trying to stay active during these challenging times.

Jennifer Juste: Uhm, I think it's, it's been interesting because we're also monitoring traffic patterns during this time we have a camera situated this system that's set up at Gordon St and Wellington St in the city, and it's been taking real time 24 hour counts data, so doesn't identify anybody or license plates or anything like that. It just counts how many cars and pedestrians and cyclists are at that intersection and we noticed at the beginning of the hard lock down and this winter in January we had about a 30% drop in traffic at on a daily basis at that intersection.

Jennifer Juste: But it's been interesting that the patterns are pretty much resumed, their normal patterns in terms of when we have rush hour and when we have our lulls in traffic as of about mid-May. So even though we're still technically under a lockdown, it sounds like people are still getting out and about and resuming some of their usual traffic path travel patterns.

Wendy King: It'll be your so interesting to see what happens because people have been so out there and maybe doing less driving and more hiking or biking or whatever. It would be interesting to see if you know we go back to what was normal or you're gonna probably be monitoring all of that.

Jennifer Juste: We've definitely seen a spike in cyclists, hard to say at this point, whether they're mostly recreational or if they're using it to get around town, but will be looking to follow those trends over time and see how traffic patterns are changing.

Wendy King: Sure, uh, when we talk about active transportation, what's the difference between that and say the trail network?

Jennifer Juste: Well, we have, so active transportation is a word we use to describe human powered modes of transportation. Typically, it talks about cycling and walking, and I'm talking about pedal bikes, not motorcycles. So pedal bikes and walking, rollerblading, skateboarding, that can fall into that category as well. So, we have our trails network which we have Tiffany Hannah here to talk about trails and that everyone is familiar with what a trail looks like.

Jennifer Juste: But some of those trails we've identified as being part of what we're calling the active transportation network and that network is a spine sort of a core segment of those trails that has a higher design standard that's really intended for people who are walking and biking longer distances to cross the city or to get to workplaces or to a school without having to use any major roads.

Jennifer Juste: So there's some road connections, but those road connections are physically separated from traffic wherever possible, and the rest of it we try to utilize our existing primary trail network as much as possible, so it's been. It's a great. It's a great network you can really get around the city quite well without having to use any major streets. If if you use the active transportation network.

Wendy King: So Tiffany may be good to bring you in here. Your department just finished, I think, a draft of the Guelph Trail Master Plan. Could you talk about that a little bit and long-term vision?

Tiffany Hannah: Yeah, I'm I'm super excited to talk about our trails master plan. The master plan says that a plan to create a better, connected, accessible and easy to use trail system.

Tiffany Hannah: Uhm, if COVID-19 taught us anything. It's how important our trails are to of both our physical and mental health. We've used this to help identify how trails are important and we've integrated this into our plan.

Tiffany Hannah: Uh trails offer an affordable means of exercises Jenny related, talked about, and also reasonable reasonable transportation options as well.

Tiffany Hannah: Uh, trails are really important to our economy, so a robust trail system came help via key attractor her businesses to choose Guelph as a place to set up shop and they can also invite visitors from out of town to come and see what we have to offer.

Tiffany Hannah: So our trail master plan really recognizes the trail importance in our city and plans for how to maintain our robust system as we grow. Our vision is about how trails are essential so we can see that more now than ever. And it also talks about how we develop our trail networks so, our vision uses keywords like inclusive, connected, sustainable and it also talks with the types of experiences we want to offer. Like different types of trails for maybe transportation or for immersing yourself in nature.

Tiffany Hannah: Uhm, and how we super active living and showcase our assets.

Wendy King: So do you do like a short term vision and a long term vision? Is that kind of how it goes?

Tiffany Hannah: Yeah, so our vision we we have 13 kind of overarching goals in our master plan and they can it be achieved through new policies, trail operation and infrastructure renewal and new trail construction. The goals relate to our strategic plan and the priority priorities completed in other departments like Jenny's department, even in transit.

Tiffany Hannah: Uhm, and so they kind of set up the plan for the next 10 years.

Tiffany Hannah: Yes, and some of them were immediate or shorter term goals that we want to tackle first are developing trails to support active transportation like Jenny suggested, improving our the navigation of our trail network so people can make it easier through the city through maybe new signs and wayfinding. You know better mapping, more technology working together with our community like Trail committee and uh, maintain the existing infrastructure and operational efficiency. Those are the ones that we want to tackle, maybe first come and they help identify her values, our opportunities in long term outcomes. For each goal we've bought 25 related actions, so we're going to, you know, tackle them incrementally over the next 10 years.

Tiffany Hannah: So I wouldn't say that they're, you know, short term and long term is just, you know what's the plan that we're going to talk over the next 10 years.

Wendy King: And as we were talking about active transportation trails are for all of that, or do or we talk trails is that mostly hiking?

Tiffany Hannah: So there's a variety of different types of trails in this city, so there are some that are more active transportation focused, but there's also a number that are that are for hiking purposes. So lots of the trails in the Hanlon Creek Conservation area uhm, our master plan talks a lot about active transportation and and the things that we can do to improve active transportation.

Tiffany Hannah: Uh, we one of the ways is making better connections. So right now there's gaps in our trail network, reaching from kind of awkward street crossings. And then there's larger fragments, so closing the gaps will help create a more continuous network between the off road and the on road.

Tiffany Hannah: And we're also going to look to sequence our trail projects so that they can start to build a cohesive next network through the city.

Tiffany Hannah: Uhm, and also work on, you know regular maintenance, especially in winter, so our GTMP recommends that more trails should be winter maintained, which is, you know, going to be helpful for navigating year round in a more comfortable way.

Tiffany Hannah: Uh, and the other big thing that our trail master plan talks about is is lighting trails, which we haven't done in the past, but we need to figure out you know what are the factors affecting lighting and you know, if we light our trails, how will it improve, you know, usability and people's experiences.

Wendy King: Well, there's so much to think about with everything. Yeah, it's amazing, so Jason, and now you're kind of head out Guelph Transit. So what would have been your big challenges related to scheduling and on demand? And that kind of thing?

Jason Simmons: So some of the channel challenges that we've been facing over the years is like we want to come up with like a I guess ways that we can reduce some of our costs and kind of increase our

customer experience. So I guess back in May, May 2nd. Actually we launched a couple of on demand services that are new in the city. One is the the community bus that used to be 2 conventional buses that would would drive circles around the city for about 8 hours a day six days a week.

Jason Simmons: And we replace that with with a bus that it essentially is on demand. So if you have an app or if you have a phone or a computer, you can call and you can book that trip. And so what we wanted to do initially our initial thoughts, and now that it's about a month into the to the pilot project is we want wanted to kind of reduce those operational expenses like kilometres and gas and fuel and everything increase our passenger's experience level, you know, decrease the amount of time they're actually on the vehicles and make it more like dynamics for the passenger, to be able to, you know, get to where they need to go quickly instead of, you know, looking at a map and saying I have to get on this bus that connects at this bus to get to where I need to go. So it's been, you know, so far the uptake has been amazing. We've reduced our kilometres by about 55% over what the Community bus was currently doing and we've actually, you know, maintained our our ridership so far, which is great.

Wendy King: I have to tell you I'd never heard of on demand and then as I was looking at it went well, that seems like something we should have thought about a long, long time ago, like as you're discussing there sure is a lot of wasted time and fuel and the way we used to do it or still do in most cities, right?

Jason Simmons: Right it's it's funny because, a little known fact is we've been actually using on demand in our specialized service for about 24 months now, but we haven't really been promoting it as far as to the rest of the the public in Guelph, and so we decided that we would use some of that technology to be able to service areas they may not be, have low service as far as transit goes or, you know, use it as a tool to decrease some of those operational costs. It also gives us like the ability to like dynamically schedule rides on the fly, so for instance, if we have a vehicle breakdown or somebody calls in sick for service, the program that we're using in the background is automatically, you know, redistributing those trips or those asks for people so that you know on their end if they actually won't see any type of delays, which is. Which is amazing, because previously launching this service you know that was all handled like manually, and you know, we would have to contact customers. Let them know that there will be delays.

Jason Simmons: Well, now they can just look at their app and say, oh, there's my bus. It would be in front of my door and in three minutes. So it's it's been an exciting time and and you know, I'm happy to be part of this this new implementation.

Wendy King: So it's pretty new as you were mentioning. What are people saying? Do they like it?

Jason Simmons: Yeah, it's it's. It's been good. It's been really good in our Community bus we've had a lot of positive comments about.

Jason Simmons: Uhm, uhm, 80% of the respondents because when you put through the app after your ride's completes, you automatically get a survey to say you don't give us a rating out of one out of five and you can leave comments and they community bus. We're we're running about 80% approval rate, which means people are, you know, liking it and we're getting comments from people saying you know well before used to take me an hour and 15 minutes and three boxes. And now I can get to my destination 7 minutes.

Jason Simmons: So, it's like it's like the biggest secret in Guelph right now and you know you know, part of me doesn't want to talk about it too much 'cause I feel that you know everybody in and start using it.

And then when I tell people that you can get somewhere in seven minutes, you know that might go up to 14, but, uh,

Wendy King: I think you made the headline today. I gotta tell ya.

Jason Simmons: but as far as the industrial service that we that we launched it's about 50/50 and we kind of knew that going in because what we were doing was we were replacing a conventional service. So a bus that was driving around a specific route every 30 minutes with on demand. But at the same time we were also offering service to a new area within the city which was the Handling Creek business park. So like 50% of the ... we knew that going into it, the better 50% of people you know might be unhappy that now they have to transfer from bus. But then the other 50% are, you know, amazed, because now they don't have to walk 40 minutes or or an hour to get to work because I don't know if you know Wendy, but like a lot of that area doesn't really have, you know user friendly amenities like sidewalks or street lights or or anything like that. So so people were walking in the slush and the snow and the rain, you know, on the other side of the Hanlon, and then now we're offering a service and those people you know are happier beyond belief in a lot of the businesses are happy that so that we are now servicing that area. 'cause now they can. You know when they put out a posting saying they're looking for people now they can say, you know transit is available so it's been, you know win/win.

Wendy King: Yeah, that's amazing. Now this will be, you know impossible to answer but just throw it out there. If you could use your crystal ball, what do you see the future of transit looking like in Guelph?

Jason Simmons: Well, I don't have a crystal ball, you're right, but but one thing that I that I hope that we're gonna get to it. You know, in a much larger discussion is like, you know, multimodal trips or like integration between some of our networks. Because right now we had kind of have like on the transit side. We kind of split. We have, you know, a specialized customer in a conventional customer, but in the future I just want to see a customer because if if somebody wants to trip or they want to go somewhere.

Jason Simmons: And they're waiting at the end of the road. Are there waiting at the bus stop? Shouldn't matter what bus or vehicles driving by if we have a bus or vehicle was driving by they should be able to get it and they should be able to get to their destination in inappropriate amount of time. And then once we start making those small head weights and you know people can realize that you know it's only three more minutes and taking my car. Or it's only 5 more minutes than taking my bike then you know, maybe I will start using transit to go downtown and you know check out the dining district door or wherever it is.

Wendy King: Yeah, sure, let's just go around the table a little bit. So Jennie, what would you say are your key priorities for your department?

Jennifer Juste: Well, I think what Jason was just talking about with the vision of the future for transit. One of our big priorities is finalizing the Transportation master plan, which has a very innovative and progressive vision for the future that is multimodal and sustainable in nature and really plans for building more resiliency and how we get around our community.

So that's a big priority for my department to the other one is. We've received a number of grants and funding sources to provide more protected bike facilities in the city, so we're trying to get cyclists off the roads into places where they feel more comfortable and safer, and trying to increase the the mode share we call it of how many people moved around by sustainable modes. Hopefully, you know,

encouraging that shift from having to drive because they feel like to safest option to maybe I do bike with my kids to school or bike to work once in awhile and and then, lastly, you know we just some are working through a lot of development related work and looking at supporting Metrolinx 2 way all day, Go service to come to Guelph in the next couple of years. So we're doing a number of studies to prepare for that and support making that happen and ensuring that our Community needs are met.

Wendy King: And Tiffany you had mentioned that you have just presented, I believe your draft report. So how do you see that all coming together?

Tiffany Hannah: Uh, we're hoping to utilize our current budget cycle to start asking for money so that we can start on a lot of the actions that our plan, some of the big ones that we want to tackle first are a sign and wayfinding strategy. We've heard from a community that this is really important and we're excited to get started on that one. We're also going to continue to put trails in parks that don't have any that's a big goal of our plan, and we're also going to build new trails and areas of growth or new development like we have been doing for the for the last number of years.

Tiffany Hannah: Yeah, so we're we're just excited to get started on on the actions and we get lots of money to start doing it.

Wendy King: Yeah, money, right? That's so we're coming up to our kind of our. I don't know people love this part or hate this part, but our rapid fire questions so this is for anybody and everybody do you expect uh, I think the way COVID-19 has changed the way people are trying things out. Do you expect it will continue? Or do you think we'd go back to what was normal transportation-wise?

Jennifer Juste: I think it'll be a mix. I think that some people will have maybe form some new patterns and behaviors and might shift some of their trips, but we're creatures of comfort and we like to go back to what is known and most familiar. So I think there's going to be a general trend towards going back to what we used to do.

Wendy King: Tiffany?

Tiffany Hannah: We've heard from our trail users that you know bike sales are up 300%, so we think that you know people are investing in more bikes and more trail use. And so you know we're hoping that it's going to last at least for five years, if not more. Like we're hoping that it's going to be a long term trend and people have really learned that they love trails. So.

Wendy King: Jason, you got your whole odd-man thing going on.

Jason Simmons: Well, you know, unfortunately I think Tiffany and Jenny are stealing half my customers. I mean, it might be a, might be it might be, you know, a little a little longer for me to recover from COVID. But you know, we're we're optimistic.

Wendy King: Okay, and real quick. What would you each say if you had to describe your community's appetite for new ways to get around?

Jennifer Juste: Curious?

Wendy King: Tiffany?

Tiffany Hannah: I think people are just really like embracing some of the new changes and the new ways of moving around the city that they haven't done before.

Wendy King: Jason?

Jason Simmons: Yeah, I think the you know, the future is a blank slate. I think that even as we speak right now in five years from now, we're probably going to be looking at stuff we haven't even been talking about. So you know, definitely be interesting.

Wendy King: Well, as always, Guelph is so forward thinking. I say that every time, but it all sounds really exciting. Thanks you so much. Jenny, Tiffany, and Jason for explaining the city's transportation networks and giving us all a glimpse into just what's coming. Thanks a lot for your time,

Tiffany Hannah: Our pleasure.

Jason Simmons: thank you.

Jennifer Juste: thank you.

Wendy King: I'm Wendy King with the City of Guelph's, Big G In conversation podcast. Thanks for joining.

Wendy King: If you have ideas for a show or comments, you can email biggpodcasts.ca. Unill next time, take care and let's keep the conversation going.