

February 19, 2010

Hi.

Again, I'd like to state that a separate pedestrian crossing is needed across the Alaska Highway at the north end of the airport. By just focusing on vehicle traffic along the highway corridor, Highways is taking an old-school vehicle-centric approach to a very problematic section of highway. Traffic lights are not the required solution for walkers and bickers crossing the highway. Treating this as a Hillcrest-only issue ignores the bigger picture of a major highway cutting off access from many neighbourhoods to downtown.

During the Range Road process, some said that an underpass could not be made attractive and inviting, even to women. The first draft of an overpass shown in the Range Road process seemed driven by cost, presenting an option that clearly wasn't going to be acceptable. In this age where we are learning to think about value of feeling safe, having the design team thinking through the eyes of safety of a women crossing is essential.

Also, the proposed underpass was placed in a spot where people felt it would be difficult to accommodate grades and drainage. People likely relied on the experience of the Hamilton Blvd culvert that was built over a wetland creek and didn't take this into account as evidenced by culvert flooding and roadbed heaving.

First, let's look at today's highway from the South Access to the top of Two-Mile Hill

The top of the South Access does not instill confidence that this proposed new section of highway will be safe. Turns at the South Access intersection are clearly not safe. Add to the mix of turning vehicles blocking views of on-coming traffic are the ever-present drivers who believe in running not only yellow lights, but also red lights. This intersection is an accident waiting to happen.

It's taken a few iterations of the top of Two-Mile intersection and it still doesn't accomplish the tasks assigned to it. Dan Burden, who the city invited here in 2002 for a Whitehorse Moves conference, said that this intersection was way overbuilt. Today, there's rumours of yet another upgrade, this time on the Range Road part.

We are a winter city — snow, ice, cold, dark, blowing snow. Pavement markings can disappear for weeks on end, leaving confusion. Some drivers choose a safe-feeling straddle-2-lanes approach and treat a 4-lane road as 2-lane, and others, who know the hidden pavement markings and are impatient, treat it as a bare 4-lane road. Into this, we have short-trip locals and long-distance highway users who're just passing through, in cars and lots of trucks.

My understanding is that these 4-lane sections are so people in a hurry can pass and get on with their lives. Since these sections are short and not common, some drivers take risks to pass, even going over speed limits. From the Two-mile Hill lights to the end of the airport is clearly such a spot.

What can we learn from the experience of the 2019 project, the "Range Road Extension Project"?

The Range Road – highway upgrade is a clear example of how complex highway reconstruction can be. Vehicles coming up Two-Mile hill still turn onto Range Road to follow the old route to get ahead of vehicles using the highway intersection at Two-Mile. People take risks to do this, cutting across both uphill and downhill lanes to accomplish this time saver.

Vehicles in the left lane heading south from the Two-Mile intersection, now find themselves in the slow lane as often vehicles speed up and pass on the right to get by the traffic slowly getting up to the speed limit.

The highway at the south end of range road is complex and confusing.

- Because the end of the divider strip is fairly close to the Sumanik Drive entrance, some people take risks — they continue to use Sumanik as they head north since it's 'only' a short drive on the wrong side. Argument appears to be that going to the Two-Mile/Hamilton corner and waiting, sometimes not even getting a green light or special flashing left turn light until other vehicles arrive at the northbound lanes, is too inconvenient.

- Also here, because speeds feel not regulated, people run the red light.

- As well, heading north at this same new Range Road light, if one doesn't pick up on the layout of lanes in this wide, winter-unmarked intersection, then you might find yourself being passed on the right just as you ease into the right lane to turn down Two-Mile Hill to go downtown.

It feels safer, when heading north past the airport, to turn onto Range Road when going downtown. A winter problem with this is that snow clearing at the post office area builds berms of snow that block visibility on traffic coming downhill from the highway intersection. The problem here is exacerbated by the south side of Range Road at the intersection being in a dip, lowering visibility. Odd?

Community vision

Active living is partly a mindset. A destination helps make people think of healthier choices. The paved airport trail, Baxter Gulch stairs, the switchback and smaller trails are all common ways of dealing with the escarpment for people

on foot and bikes. This area is an obvious, natural route for people traversing between downtown and the west side of the airport.

The only real safe solution to crossing the highway on foot is a separate underpass. This way Highways can continue to build its various vehicle solutions and people on foot can stay out of the way! Whitehorse has grown from 12,000 in late 70s to almost 30,000 today. Clearly it will continue to grow, The airport and highway traffic will also grow and, if forced to use traffic lights to cross multiple lanes of traffic, crossing between the neighbourhoods and downtown will just get more intimidating and unattractive.

There must be a safe walkable highway crossing. As my summary of highway problems shows, a simple traffic light thrown into the multi-lane airport–Hillcrest mix will clearly be a poor solution. Pressing walk lights, watching for the various turning traffic and trying to get to a safe haven on either end is clearly going to be a problem. Crossing on foot wants to be efficient; Burns, Hillcrest and Range Road crossings are not direct and people still cross at the Salvation Army traditional foot crossing. Politeness says we should think about the most direct route for McIntyre, a community of traditional walkers. Common sense says we should look at crossing the highway with a few children in tow.

The big picture

Without an underpass, Highways does not provide support for the City of Whitehorse in what it is trying to achieve in developing a cycling / pedestrian network that reduces the number of SOVs (single occupancy vehicles) that are entering the downtown core.

In one planning meeting, the head of City Planning was very clear that this highway upgrade project should not result in getting more people to drive downtown.

People following city planning discussions know ...

- We want a vibrant downtown core as an interesting destination with restaurants, stores, a night scene,...
- We want more people either living downtown, or able to get there without driving and wanting to park.
- We want more downtown land going for residential and business development, with less calls for more and bigger free downtown parking lots.
- We need more transit and fewer single occupancy vehicles going downtown.
- Fewer vehicles going downtown means less need for larger feeder routes such as Mountainview and Industrial roads and proposed McIntyre Creek connector.

Access by coming Tank Farm developments and new subdivisions on First Nations lands clearly show that this area west of the airport will grow. Not building a proper crossing cripples future active living and misses opportunities for attractive development. This seems unfair to First Nation land holders here. These new neighbourhoods are walking distance to downtown and shouldn't be doomed to be major-highway-bounded subdivisions where people routinely drive downtown. 10,000+ people will live here in the short term. Likely more later.

Green development means more than focusing on vehicles and carbon taxes. If the government is serious about addressing the future then the focus should not just be on highways and efficient cars and trucks, it needs to look at, wherever possible, designing that people don't have to drive everywhere.

In conclusion

The new pedestrian path at Range Road seems to be an afterthought as it crosses into the green verge between Range Road and the highway and soon after comes back to Range Road and quits.

The next version of the highway continues to show the paved path beside the highway. Currently the concrete barrier feels inadequate when traffic zips by splashing snow and dirt into the paved path. With a wider highway there'll be even more snow being cleared to the side making walking feel even more unsafe here.

Moving buildings, likely eventually even the ARC, show that this is a major project. An underpass seems trivial compared to moving businesses, buildings, repossessing land.

What if instead of traffic lights we just had roundabouts: top of Two Mile, Range Road, Burns, Hillcrest and a two lane highway? Having travelled in other parts of the world with lots of traffic, roundabouts seem to work just fine for big intersections. But not for us apparently!

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