

Discussion on Roads 2009

My comments following are not new; I've said the same thing numerous times.

In the 60's, 70's, 80's, and as recently as the 1990's, our City's leaders made willful and deliberate decisions to plan Avon Township and now Rochester Hills to be primarily a residential bedroom community with a small amount of light industry, some offices and only enough retail to support the City and our immediate neighbors. Those decisions, as reflected in our Master Land Use Plans, resulted in hundreds of builders, building thousands of homes, which were purchased by some 40,000 residents of our community. Those MLUP's were a promise those leaders made to develop the community in that certain manner, and all those economic decisions by all those people relied on those promises. In my mind those commitments then were covenants that we, now, are not permitted to break or simply ignore.

Over the last decade, there has been pressure to increase commercial, and to a lesser extent industrial, development in order to increase the "tax base", and avoid the political difficulties of dealing with tax revenues that don't meet expectations. That was and continues to be a fundamentally flawed approach. Why? Because there never was enough undeveloped or redevelopable land to have more than a token effect on the "tax base" compared to what was originally planned. But, there were enough opportunities to change the character of large areas of the City, and have major impacts on our neighbors. Tienken and Rochester, and the Hamlin corridor are examples. If we are not mindful of the need to maintain the character of our City, we could begin a decline that can lead to a less desirable community, hence lower home values, less tax revenue.

The Master Thoroughfare Plan Update from 2008 is the third transportation plan or road plan I have participated in during more than 15 years in the planning community for this City, and now on City Council. This was the third time we have been through such an effort, using three different Consultants, with three different methodologies with essentially the same overall results. Based on this experience, I have a few observations to share.

First, we cannot build ourselves out of congestion. There isn't enough money, and it doesn't work. Adding capacity to roads, typically by widening, adds traffic volume and you end up with essentially the same congestion. But wouldn't congestion have been worse if we had not widened it? Probably not, because in the real world people find alternatives: different routes; different times; different modes.

Second, roads and the roadway system have a significant effect on the quality of life in a community – both positively and negatively. Four or 5 or 6 lane roadways can handle a lot of traffic, and they will tend to make travel easier. But note the first observation: if you build it they will come. Four, 5, 6, or even 7 lane roads take a lot of real estate and are not pleasant to live near. Wide roads are expensive, both for ROW and expense to construct and maintain. Major arteries are necessary, but not everything has to be a major arterial. For safety and maintaining the character of our community, the Planning

Commission and City Council discussed and debated the policy of 4 lane “residential”, or relatively narrow, boulevards for future widening projects. Livernois was the first example.

Third, in the past Master Thoroughfare Plans and again in the recent update, we recognized the first and second observations explicitly that we would have to expect a certain level of congestion at certain times of the day, period. There is and will be no practical, realistic, desirable or affordable way around it. Congestion used to a lot worse around here twenty years ago. There has been a significant change in the congestion patterns. There has been a great impact from SCATS. Flex time is much more in evidence, so is working at home. Plus the demographics.

The most recent Master Thoroughfare Plan Update includes: “A plan for future roadway cross sections was prepared to guide projects for every major roadway regardless of the short-term and long-term opportunities and timing of the improvements (figure 6.2).” Figure 6.2 specifies Tienken road between west of Livernois and Sheldon roads as the 3-lane cross section, except for the already improved intersection at Rochester Road. That is an explicit recognition that the undesirable effects of a wider expansion on Tienken outweighed the limited benefits. It is my opinion that a 4 or 5 lane expansion of Tienken would require a major change in the topography between Paint Creek and Rochester Road that would alter the character of the area from residential to something resembling a highway, not a road.

This Council discussion started because of concerns of residents that were raised when the Road Commission for Oakland County held a public meeting to discuss potential plans for Tienken Road. Those plans were to widen Tienken Road and the two alternatives under consideration were a 4-lane boulevard or a 5-lane road from west of Livernois Road to Sheldon Road. According to the RCOC, the widening plans were a result of a so-called “earmark” in the Federal budget that was set aside specifically to widen Tienken Road in this area. If the money was not spent, it would be lost.

The 2008 CoRH Thoroughfare Plan Update clearly shows Tienken Road planned for a 3-lane road along this same area (except for the existing intersection at Rochester Road). Whether to improve Tienken to 3, 4 or 5 lanes is not a transportation or engineering question, it is decision about the character of that portion of the City of Rochester Hills.

I have included a resolution for Council’s consideration that would affirm the City’s Master Thoroughfare Plan’s designation of Tienken Road roadway section of 3-lanes between Livernois and Sheldon as the desired design for any road improvement for this area.

James Rosen
May 12, 2009