St. John’s Sideroad in Town of Aurora officially re-opens following extensive re-construction and rehabilitation project

Road improvements provide significant enhancements to McKenzie Marsh

NEWMARKET – St. John’s Sideroad in the Town of Aurora was officially re-opened to traffic today following an extensive two-year re-construction period to widen the roadway, install new sewers and watermains. The improvements were required to meet the demands of central York Region’s growing community and enhance the local natural environment.

Town of Aurora Mayor Tim Jones joined Town of Markham Regional Councillor Bill O'Donnell, Chair of York Region’s Transportation and Works Committee, York Regional Chair and CEO Bill Fisch and a host of residents and municipal councillors at the re-opening ceremony, and unveiled of one of two permanently mounted plaques that detailed some of the history of the McKenzie Marsh and the improvements made.

The St. John’s Sideroad project cost $20 million for the road, water, wastewater and environmental enhancements. While not the largest road project undertaken by the Region, it is one of the most environmentally-significant.

“The improvements to St. John’s Sideroad and the accompanying water and wastewater infrastructure will help to serve the residents of Aurora and our neighbours well for years to come,” said Mayor Jones. “I’m extremely pleased at the enhancements that we have worked towards with our York Region partners, most notably the improvements to protect and enhance the environmentally-significant McKenzie Marsh.”

The project was particularly challenging since St. John’s Sideroad divides the local McKenzie Wetland Complex (McKenzie Marsh), a permanent home to numerous animal species and fish. Recognizing an opportunity to enhance the marsh along with the roadway, York Region developed an innovative design to limit intrusion on the marsh as well as increase its overall functionality through discussions with the Town of Aurora, local residents and environmental groups.

Through a partnership with the Town of Aurora and a series of public consultations with residents and other stakeholders, the Region presented an innovative boardwalk design that separates the roadway and the marsh and improves water flow between the marsh’s two segmented portions.

“After hosting extensive consultations with neighbours and other interested people on the St. John’s Sideroad reconstruction, it became very clear that environmental protection would be a critical factor in all aspects of this project,” said Regional Councillor O'Donnell. “By working together with the town and the area residents, we have created the necessary planning and construction efforts to enhance both the roadway and the wetland.”

Before construction began, St. John’s Sideroad was a rolling, rural, two-lane road with narrow gravel shoulders that butted against the marsh. The segmented sections of the marsh were connected by a series of small pipes for water circulation.

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The original design had several limitations, including:

- Two-lane structure no longer sufficient to support local traffic
- Rolling hills that made visibility for drivers difficult
- Narrow shoulders and poor lighting that did not permit safe walking or biking
- Small pipes connecting the marsh that became easily clogged and prevented water circulation
- Proximity of the marsh to the roadway that allowed:
  - Runoff of oil, dirt and other sediments to go directly into the marsh
  - High death rates for animals crossing the road

Following a 10-year process of Environmental Assessments, planning, consultations and building, York Region added several unique features to the overall design, including:

**Environmental improvements**

- New and larger wet culverts installed to permit better water circulation under the road
- A new dry culvert with fencing installed to permit safe animal crossing under the road
- Curbs and gutters installed with oil grit separators to catch and treat road run-off
- “Sheet pile” construction material used to contain the road and minimize expansion into the marsh
- Root wads (cut tree roots) installed throughout the marsh to allow for fish spawning habitat

**Community improvements**

- A wooden boardwalk with benches was constructed along the length of the marsh, allowing people to walk, bike and enjoy the natural habitat
- The boardwalk now forms part of the Nokiida Trail System, linking it to the Holland River Trail System
- Antique-style light posts installed along the boardwalk

**Safety improvements**

- Road levelled to permit better visibility for drivers and widened to accommodate increased traffic
- New gates and signals installed at the C.N. railway crossing

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