

Alliance says GTA West corridor not in public's best interest

By Mark Pavilons

Ontario's leading environmental groups believe the planned GTA West Corridor is not in the public's best interest. In fact, they see no real need for it at all.

In the submission to the province, Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence, on behalf of the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance Steering Committee, noted there's insufficient information currently available to make any route suggestions.

"Once the cost data is tabulated, the climate change impacts accounted for and the demand of employment uses is considered we don't believe this highway will be needed," he said.

"Building the GTA West in the Greenbelt is not in the public interest, as it is a costly use of our limited infrastructure dollars and is contrary to the provincial climate change vision and provincial growth strategies. Further, the Greenbelt Plan infrastructure policies require that need is demonstrated, and that there is no reasonable alternative."

Two urban growth centres in the provincial Places to Grow act - Brampton and Vaughan - are serviced by the 407 and 410 and expansions are planned for the 427, 400 and 410. The GTA West corridor is approximately 13 kilometres north of the Vaughan City Centre. Gray said they believe that need has not been demonstrated and that a further review of the 2041 growth targets for York Region and Peel will show that this highway is not needed.

"We strongly believe that there are viable alternatives that must precede building new highways which cut through the Greenbelt. These alternatives include investing in public transit; expanding existing roads; increasing rail capacity and connections, and providing incentives for trucks to use the 407 ETR."

Regional official plan growth projections through 2041 indicate that the substantial growth in Peel and York will be located in the northeast of Vaughan and Brampton areas which will be serviced by the 410 and 427 and 407 highways. According to a report from York Region based on 2041 growth scenarios the employment demand in the area does not justify the number of interchanges or the need for this highway as they anticipate most of the new employment growth to be in office employment and the service industry.

Overall, "the trend in employment growth is expected to occur without an increase in square foot space."

King's Susan Swail, Greenbelt program manager with Environmental Defence, said it's important to look at this highway in the context of our regional planning. The Regions of Peel and York are currently undertaking 2041 planning exercises with the purpose of planning future infrastructure needs.

The focus of new growth in the regions is within or adjacent to existing urban growth centres where transit, sewer and road infrastructure exist, such as Brampton, Vaughan City Centre, Markham. Building a new highway 13 kilometres above these growth centres is not consistent with the Growth Plan or the Greenbelt Plan.

One of the purposes of the highway is to move goods through the GTA. The environmental groups suggest the province considers further study of an east-west rail link between the Keele St. CN yard, the Bolton yard, Brampton yard and the new Milton rail yard. "Today, both transit and rail alternatives are more efficient, sustainable and a publically more acceptable option over new highway development. We urge the province and this study to give further review of the rail options," Gray said.

They contend the GTA West Corridor will have "substantial environmental impacts."

The highway will cut through the Credit river watershed and Humber watersheds and it will also impact many tributaries of these rivers.

They are also concerned about a lack of concrete cost estimates by the province.

"We believe that once full cost accounting is completed for this project that the costs will outweigh any benefits to neighbouring municipalities. Just using construction costs fails to account for substantial expropriation costs which we estimate would be \$2 billion considering land costs of \$100,000 per acre. The costs component will also be impacted by the kilometres of road and the number of bridges required for each route option," Gray observed.

If the highway is to be built, the groups recommend the route be moved further south to the urban centres; that natural heritage systems be avoided where possible; that interchanges into the Greenbelt or small towns be avoided, and that restoration of habitat loss be considered.

The Ontario Greenbelt Alliance is a diverse multi-stakeholder coalition of over 100 groups who shares a common vision for protecting and expanding the Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt. Environmental Defence is the coordinator of the Ontario Greenbelt Alliance.