

Local opposition to Metrolinx funding options

By Mark Pavilons

The Big Move may be necessary, but forcing residents to pay ever-increasing taxes, is not the preferred way to go. Metrolinx, the government agency created to improve transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Areas, presented its investment strategy to support over 400 kilometres of new and enhanced transit, along with improvements to roads and highways. "Congestion is getting worse every day. It's having an increasingly negative impact on both our quality of life and our region's economy," said Robert Prichard, Metrolinx board chair. "The \$16 billion of new transit being built today will deliver real results for commuters, but we cannot stand still. We need to continue to invest in The Big Move and get the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) moving again."

The Big Move's next wave of projects will transform the region by building new light rapid transit in Mississauga, Brampton and Hamilton; new bus rapid transit in Halton, Peel, Toronto and Durham; subway expansion with the Relief Line and the Yonge Subway Extension into York Region; major enhancements to GO Transit as well as improvements to municipal transit projects, roads and highways, and active transportation options.

The investment strategy is designed to support a set of transit and transportation projects that comprise the next wave of The Big Move. The investment strategy includes funding recommendations, such as a 1% increase to the HST; a regional 5-cent-per-litre gas tax; business parking levy; toll lanes and amendments to development charges.

"Metrolinx is recommending that we have dedicated funds," said Bruce McCuaig, Metrolinx president and CEO. "We are also recommending that these funds be placed into a transportation trust fund to create certainty that The Big Move projects are delivered and to provide the accountability and transparency GTHA residents demand and deserve."

Councillors agree
on the need

King Mayor Steve Pellegrini said there's no question we need good transit, which will help free up our roads. However, the gas tax is unfair and it's something he opposes.

Pellegrini pointed out King is at the border of the GTA and people to the north of us will benefit the most. Even King City's GO line is filled with commuters from the north.

He understands that Metrolinx has to find the funds, which ultimately come from you and I, the taxpayers.

"I'm for equity," he said. "Everyone needs to pay."

He supports levying a charge on HOV lanes, noting this is a choice. If drivers are willing to pay for it, great.

Taxpayers can't totally subsidize transportation.

Pellegrini also believes development charges should be part of the transportation funding formula.

Ward 5 Councillor Debbie Schaefer said finding new revenue streams and timing are of the essence. "We're playing catch-up regarding transportation infrastructure and we have to get moving," she said.

She doesn't think there is enough money to be found in trimming the fat and looking for inefficiencies within the government. She likes the diversity of ideas presented by Metrolinx and she favours "spreading the hurt."

If the gas tax is deemed appropriate, she prefers to see it across the board, and not just in the GTHA. There are other jurisdictions in Canada, she pointed out, that use gas taxes to fund various projects. To a degree, people do have a choice in the amount of gas they use.

She doesn't think a 1% hike in the HST will hurt too much and at least it's fair because it's extended across the province. She would also like to see someone examine business sources of revenue.

Schaefer added the civic action campaign "your32.com" refers to the 32 minutes which will be saved when the Big Move is funded and is in place. There will be many people who will look at their lives today, how they live it, and they will say that the Big Move does not affect them. But, this thought process ignores the possibility that one may live in a different place or that one may want to work in a different place; that your family, particularly the next generation, may want to make different choices.

Transportation is important in York Region, with GO buses and trains, as well as VIVA.

She admitted it will be a tough sell at Queen's Park.

Councillor Cleve Mortelliti said the transit system needs to be expanded, sooner rather than later.

?So something has to give.

?The Big Move has been a comprehensive study over five years. And it appears the study groups have looked at every angle possible of how to dramatically improve the system and lesson the gridlock. But it's going to cost \$50 billion.

?They should call it the ?Big Root Canal! It's going to hurt.?

MPP?says

Liberals lack
credibility

York-Simcoe MPP Julia Munro agrees the need is there, but doesn't place a lot of trust in the financial responsibility demonstrated by the Liberals at Queen's Park.

She pointed to a Liberal promise about no new taxes and then points to the provincial health tax. She's not confident that any new taxes will be dedicated to Metrolinx and may simply be gobbled up in provincial coffers.

As well, the term ?revenue tools??means ?new taxes,? she said, adding the government has literally blown billions.

?So it's hard to see an credibility??in financial management, Munro noted. The suggestion about an HST increase would be a joint federal-provincial mechanism and it's doubtful Ottawa would go along with it.

As well, the government tossed up a rebate mechanism which would be complicated.

Munro said her riding constituents say they feel the pinch and would not support a new gas tax.

Tough choices:

MPP?Jaczek

The recommendations by Metrolinx will be ?carefully considered??by the government, but there are tough choices to be made, according to Oak-Ridges Markham MPP?Dr. Helena Jaczek. The premier, she said, wants to take her time to ?get it right,? but the need is pressing.

?If we don't do it now, the economy in the GTHA may be in jeopardy,? she said.

No one wants to pay more taxes, but in the end they hope to ?spread the pain in the fairest and most logical way.?

We all have to ?grin and bear it,? and in the end, Jaczek said the result will be a huge improvement.

The federal government needs to step up and offer some assistance, since the GTA?is key to the province's economy. She said MPPs are talking to their federal Liberal counterparts to press the issue.

Regardless of the methods used to fund the program, Jaczek pointed out there is only one taxpayer and most will be passed on to consumers in one way or another.

Find out more about The Big Move at www.bigmove.ca.