

Environmental Defence hosts webinars for communities impacted by 413

By **ROB PAUL**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

As the Ontario government continues to plan towards building the GTA West Highway (Highway 413) through Milton, Georgetown, Caledon, Brampton, and Vaughan, Environmental Defence is providing webinar sessions for the communities that will be impacted.

Environmental Defence is a Canadian environmental advocacy organization that works with governments, industry, and individuals to defend clean water, a safe climate, and healthy communities. With the effects the proposed highway will have on ecosystems in the Greenbelt, Environmental Defence has started the Stop the 413 campaign.

To supplement the campaign, they've been hosting webinars for communities to help provide information, answer questions, and empower local leaders to help make a difference.

The Caledon webinar will be Tuesday, March 23 at 7 p.m. and people who are interested can register at act.environmentaldefence.ca/page/75760/petition/1.

One of the featured speakers of the webinar is Ontario Climate Program Manager from Environmental Defence Sarah Buchanan. She's adamant that the webinars can make a difference by providing a better understanding of the impacts the highway will have on specific areas.

"We have essentially alongside residents in communities along the path of the highway and local organizations co-hosted a number of webinars already that take a deeper dive into how this highway could impact specific communities. We've got so many different communities that have different feels to them and different approaches to things like growth and different people speaking up.

"It's been an interesting series and we've co-hosted webinars in Halton Region and King-Vaughan, and Caledon seemed like a good place to go next because lots of residents have been speaking up there, so we wanted to take a deeper dive specifically into what dynamics are at play in Caledon around this highway."

It can be difficult to jump into something as in-depth as working to stop a billion-dollar highway, and that's why Environmental Defence wants to help those against it in the areas being affected by connecting them with the right people.

"One of the goals here is definitely helping to give people a voice," she said. "When people hear more information about this highway and how it might impact the community, if they want to take action to try and change that and push for a better alternative, we're going to give them ways to do that and we're going to introduce them to local leaders who are taking action.

"I think, in general, people can rightfully be confused by how to engage with their political system, particularly when we're looking at municipal and regional councils, how to sign up to speak at Council, how to reach the right people who are making the decisions at a specific level of government. It can be really daunting and unfortunately, as a result, a lot of folks tune out and think they can't make a difference. That's something we want to push back against and show them their voice matters and show them the ways they can speak up to decision-makers. That's another goal, to help people navigate their political system to try and make their voices heard."

Another major piece to the webinars is ensuring residents in these communities have a full understanding of the situation and can then become the leaders in the fight against the highway.

'Honestly, it's the most important thing (informing residents of the impact of the highway),' she said. 'This campaign is now led by residents in these communities and we're definitely in the backseat here. Making sure the folks that are going to be the most impacted have a say in it and understand what it could mean for their communities is absolutely the most important thing here.'

'On the surface, a highway might sound like something that would address the transportation issues in the region, it could be a multi-billion-dollar mistake to not really ask the question, 'is this really the best way to address growing transportation needs in the region?' And frankly, that question has been asked before and answered by an expert panel, which is now being ignored.'

Buchanan says Environmental Defence understands the need for growing areas to have better transportation options, but that doesn't mean building a 400-series highway should be the first and only option that's looked at, that's why they feel the need to provide communities with the full picture.

'A greater sense of awareness, just getting the facts out there about why highways, and in particular this highway, often don't solve the traffic congestion issues that people are facing,' she said. 'There's not always a lot of awareness because frankly it's a tough one to wrap your brain around.'

'You think, 'oh, I'm stuck on the highway, why don't we just add a new highway and things will get better?' but when you look at the evidence, that doesn't actually add up. In particular, with this highway, the way it's structured and the way the route is structured, the modelling has shown in the past that it won't actually save commuters very much time at all.'

Rather than hosting one webinar for all the communities, Environmental Defence wanted to concentrate on each area impacted because there's different circumstances for those involved.

'Getting out facts like that is really key to helping folks understand why it's really not worth the risks to build this highway and not worth the money either, but also being able to answer people's questions and being able to connect with local communities to hear what is important that's different in each of these communities.'

'One aspect of this highway might be more important to people in Halton and maybe it's different in Caledon, so hearing how those communities see this highway differently and have different concerns because of the different impacts. For example, in Caledon, the gravel industry is a big player and that's something we're going to be focusing on in the webinar to make it more specific to Caledon.'

Stopping Highway 413 is about the communities and their people, and that's why Environmental Defence started to webinars, to help build the fight at a grassroots level.

'Coming out of the webinars is a greater sense of community and connecting people who are concerned and people who want to talk about the alternatives to this highway because that's the other side of the coin. We're not just going in there to say, 'don't build this highway' and 'don't let people move around,' because we understand this region is growing and people need new ways to move around.'

'We want to present those alternatives like better transit and how to do that and redirecting truck traffic to the 407' ideas like that, that will help make sure people and goods will get where they need to go without destroying the farms, green spaces, and communities that are important to people.'

For more information on Environmental Defence and the Stop the 413 campaign, visit environmentaldefence.ca.