

Delegates continue to urge Council to follow Markham and oppose Highway 413

By Rob Paul

At a Region of Peel Council meeting last week, Caledon environmental activist Jenni Le Forestier delegated on behalf of residents concerned about the proposed Highway 413.

Le Forestier's delegation urged Councillors to endorse the DAMN (Demand A Moratorium Now) campaign that calls on the government to impose an immediate moratorium on all new gravel mining approvals, until an independent panel can chart a new path forward.

'MTO has yet to properly engage and consult with the First Nations, the treaty holders,' said Le Forestier. 'We wish to hold MTO to account as citizens of the crown, to implore that MTO is duty-bound to have proper consultation with band chiefs and heritage leaders. It is our constitutional duty according to Section 35 of our constitution. They need to respect our laws of free prior and informed consent, which is enshrined in Canadian law with Bill C15 legislating the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. If you visit the Impact Assessment Agency website, Councillors, you will see many of the concerns that have been raised by several nations. Those concerns should be our concerns and they have not been addressed.'

Le Forestier went on to argue that with Highway 407 'sitting empty', it could be used as a way to handle the truck traffic that leads to the congestion that Highway 413 was initially thought to solve.

'We request our municipal leaders to initiate discussions with the Premier of Ontario and advocate on our behalf to negotiate a mutually agreeable arrangement that provides commercial vehicles with a cost-effective toll arrangement to use Highway 407,' she said. 'Diverting these vehicles from Highway 401 and other east/west regional roads will create immediate congestion relief and provide a viable alternative for the Province and taxpaying community to the financially and environmentally destructive Highway 413. Currently being touted by the Ontario Progressive Conservative Party as a solution for traffic congestion for 'working families,' those of us who live in the areas that are already impaired with high volumes of truck traffic due to aggregate extraction, know that the highway would take years to complete, would only increase truck traffic on rural roads, and, once built, would fill in with more volume due to the outrageous warehousing and ecommerce that is currently applying for MZOs on the Greenbelt. Instead of a futile and expensive and environmentally devastating exercise like the 413, we would like our municipal governments to advocate for opening the 407 to commercial trucking.'

Caledon Regional Councillor Annette Groves endorsed the DAMN campaign and with Markham Council recently joining Vaughan and King in opposing Highway 413, Le Forestier spoke at a recent Caledon Council meeting urging Council to do the same.

'The Markham motion was a fulsome motion, well thought out, looked at by several experts, and not lightly brought to the Markham Council,' Le Forestier said. 'What we thought was that the Town of Caledon would do likewise once having looked at the information that has been presented by many experts, many delegates, and many people who are very concerned?your taxpayers.'

Prior to Le Forestier finishing her delegation, she was muted on 'point of order.' Both Councillor Groves and Councillor Ian Sinclair objected to the muting of the delegation.

Groves also had her hand raised prior to the end of the delegation but was declined the chance to ask questions. This led to an argument between Groves and Mayor Allan Thompson?Groves was declined the chance to ask questions.

'My hand was on the board, and I don't know who took it down,' said Groves. 'My hand was up to ask questions of the delegation and that is my right as a member of Council. I didn't take my hand down and I think its rude people are muting the delegations because you don't want to hear what they have to say. Let's talk about transparency. Here we go again, democracy at its finest.'

The discussion was supposed to centre on the City of Markham and, as Councillor Jennifer Innis pointed out, the discussion wavered from the topic, which led Thompson to move on.

'There was a loss of decorum, and they did not follow the rule,' said Thompson. 'That was the conditions that we had tonight and when you crossed it, I'm sorry. We are going to have more discussion and I'm sure she'll have many times to delegate again.'

Lana Goldberg, Ontario Climate Program Manager for Environmental Defence and Gideon Forman, Climate Change and Transportation Policy Analyst for the David Suzuki Foundation, also spoke to the Markham motion.

Both urged Caledon Council to oppose Highway 413 and align themselves with the City of Markham.

'The province says the highway would lead to a 30-minute time savings on roads; however, according to an expert panel commissioned by the previous government, the proposed highway would only save drivers in the Region an extra 30 to 60 seconds,' said Goldberg. 'At the local level, travel times are likely to increase. The municipality of Vaughan conducted a study on time savings at the local level in north Vaughan and found that travel times would increase by 35 per cent with the building of the highway.'

'It will make traffic congestion worse,' said Forman. 'I can't think of any city on earth that has solved congestion by building more highways. If 413 goes ahead, it will incentivize car use and soon you'll be right back where you started with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Highway 413 will exacerbate the climate crisis, which I know we're all concerned about. It will do this by encouraging the use of gas burning vehicles and paving portions of the Greenbelt.'