

Environmental activist says smart building won't change irreversible impacts of Highway 413

By Rob Paul

With the Government of Ontario pushing towards building Highway 413 and reaffirming its commitment to expanding and building highways in the Fall Economic Statement, there has been an increased dialogue from those in the communities that will be affected about the concept of 'smart building' and 'smart growth' as urban sprawl will likely accompany the highway.

After Premier Doug Ford made an announcement in Caledon Village last month with Mayor Allan Thompson, Minister of Transportation Caroline Mulroney, and Minister of Finance Peter Bethlenfalvy, that there would be \$145 billion in investments in infrastructure projects from the provincial government to build and expand highways and also create jobs, it seems increasingly likely that Highway 413 will be coming to Caledon.

'There's no other place anyone would rather start a business, work, or raise a family and that's why our government is continuing to build Ontario and will be delivering the much needed 413 highway,' Ford said at the announcement. 'Right now, our 400-series highways are clogged with gridlock, ask anyone who drives on them, and you'll hear the same thing. They're not suitable for the current needs of Ontarians, let alone to handle the influx of new residents who are expected to arrive in Ontario over the next five years.'

Smart building or smart growth are ways of developing land and augmenting infrastructure in an environmentally-friendly way that will reduce long-term impacts both on the climate crisis and on communities as a whole.

With the complexities of modern building and the climate crisis hanging over all development, there has been an increased awareness of what goes on outside of the walls of the building environmentally. Now, with smart building, there's more drive to ensure the lowest cost and environmental impact over the building lifecycle in an integrated, dynamic, and functional way with an emphasis on promoting positive environmental impacts (rooftop gardens to reduce energy demand and greenhouse gas emissions).

Environmental Defence—an agency dedicated to defending clean water, safe climate, and healthy communities who have long opposed Highway 413—define smart growth as a 'an alternative vision to sprawling low density living and recognizes that we need to make smart choices as our cities grow.

'As our population increases and more people move to cities, we need to grow smarter. Smart growth is a way of planning our communities that addresses challenges such as where to live, how to move around, and how to protect the resources that sustains us. Smart, complete communities have services and shops nearby to reduce gridlock.'

Some of the recommendation of smart growth from Environmental Defence include fewer single-use buildings, with a mix of retail shops, housing and businesses together to make better use of land and infrastructure; options for people to move around via cycling, walking and public transit; a variety of places where people can live and work, with more housing choices (rental, basement apartments, condos and co-op housing and single family homes) to accommodate people of different incomes, needs, and ages; and better decision-making that is fair and transparent. Planning decisions should include public involvement and the disclosure of the cost of pipes, roads, and services.

Though Jenni Le Forestier, 2021 Dufferin-Caledon Green federal candidate and one of the lead environmental activists in Caledon against Highway 413, believes smart growth is important, she just doesn't see how it can work with a government project like this that will invite urban sprawl.

'Are we talking about putting gardens on buildings? I think the square footage of a building is still the square footage and if you're putting it on the best prime farmland, it's not a good use of land and not smart planning,' she said. 'Justifying building in order to

put through a highway or putting through a highway in order to justify building, whichever way you look at it, the highway is driving sprawl, e-commerce is driving the highway, and the combined amount of acreage that is going to be lost for this sprawl scheme is massive.

?No matter how many rooftop gardens you put in, you're still never going to get that prime soil back, which is a finite non-renewable resource. You will never get the streams and woodlands back, you will have lost the biodiversity and replacing it on a rooftop is called astroturfing, greenwashing, or offsetting. If you're removing nature from one spot and trying to recreate it in another, you will not succeed in replicating these fragile ecosystems. If you believe in the climate emergency, and I think we all do, then why would you degrade the Greenbelt for another highway that is 10 minutes away from one that exists already that is underused (Highway 407).?

An expert panel has already projected that Highway 413 will only save commuters approximately 30 to 60 seconds per trip and will have minimal impact on gridlock as the population in the area grows.

If the highway won't actually make much difference for people in the community, then Le Forestier wants to know why it would go forward, especially with the other negative impacts?not only environmental?that will be come through developing it.

?The question is who is this highway for? when you look at who this highway is for, it's not for commuters, it's a highway for developers to expropriate land, build on land, and enrich themselves,? she said. ?This will not save time on people's work commute, so, there's no justification there. It will fill in over the next five to 10 years, if not sooner and so, what's the point? Then also, when you look at the north and south side of where the routes proposed, that land will be made potentially available for pits and quarries, the gravel material that needs to be excavated to build the highway has to be within 50 kilometres of the route. If you live in Orangeville, you're going to see an increase in truck traffic, dust, noise, and traffic accidents. We're seeing it already with the amount of trucks that are on the road, this is not going to make your drive any better because those trucks have to take that material to the site to build the highway.

?Any way you look at it, whether the highway itself or the land needed for the highway, or the material needed to build the highway, it will have a hugely massive impact. It's really not the direction we should be going in if we're truly talking about land and needs, we have a housing crisis and this isn't solving the housing crisis, and we have a health crisis, this isn't addressing the health crisis. This is clearly a project that is for a very small number of people and it's being forced on the rest of Ontario through a very undemocratic process, and its impacts will be devastating.?

When asked about communities opposing the highway last month, Ford explained that those who are opposed aren't the ones in the areas being impacted, but Le Forestier says the Premier isn't listening to the people in place like Caledon that are against it.

?I think he's (Ford) listening to the politicians in the communities he's visiting, and I don't think he's listening to the people who actually live here that are faced with the huge impacts of pits and quarries every single day,? she said. ?I think the opposition to the highway is across the entire GTA and the more people that know about the highway, the less they like it. The message is clear, it's not just the people who live in the city that oppose it, it's actually the people who live along the route who are going to be impacted by it. Whether it's their land being expropriated, or whether it's the impact of pits and quarries, or whether it's a threat to their farmland or food security, or even just the environmental impacts they're worried about, there are many different types of people who are opposed to this. I think Doug Ford is looking at it through the lens of the people he's talking to around the breakfast table, as opposed to looking at it through the lens of the people who are going to be paying for the highway.?

Le Forestier encourages people to continue to look at Highway 413 from a critical point of view and to not look past the potential impacts it will have on Caledon and other communities because of statements about commute times or the concept of smart building.

?If you look at the MZOs that are being approved and who's behind those MZOs?Amazon?huge warehouse distribution companies, we know e-commerce has taken off during the pandemic, but it's because we've been in lockdown. People are stuck in their homes and that will hopefully not be the case forever, and if we're supposed to be looking at local businesses and supporting local, then

e-commerce isn't the way forward. I really object to local politicians supporting international corporations above local business. I think this highway is being driven by this interest in warehouses, and those warehouses aren't supplying an infinite amount of jobs. This isn't for the people, it's for corporations and as we come out of the pandemic, we should be looking at our own sustainability. Politicians are supposed to represent public interest, and public interest is not a highway.?