

Highway not coming through Caledon

By Bill Rea

The Province has announced it is not moving ahead with the proposed highway in the GTA's West Corridor, and that has sparked reactions of frustration locally.

Ontario has accepted an expert advisory panel's recommendation that a proposed highway in the GTA West Corridor is not the best way to address changing transportation needs, stated a news release that was issued by the government early Friday afternoon. The release also stated that the panel has recommended a narrower corridor, about one-third the size of the area that's been under study, be protected from development while the province assesses what infrastructure, such as new transit or utilities, will be needed to support the growing region.

The environmental assessment (EA) of the Corridor was started in 2007 to address transportation needs in the area. The Corridor was created to provide a transportation link heading west from Highway 400, and there had been considerable talk about a 400-series highway going in (it was informally known as Highway 413). The Ministry of Transportation suspended work on the EA in December 2015, and set up the advisory panel to look into the matter.

There were concerns the announcement will impact the Town's long-term land-use and transportation planning.

I am disappointed that the Province has discontinued the EA process, Mayor Allan Thompson said in a statement issued late Friday afternoon. Literally hundreds of jobs are at stake while major investors that we know of are forced to hold up planned investments without adequate transportation access.

He also pointed out the Corridor has been identified as a necessary piece of growth infrastructure to help alleviate congestion on Caledon roads and gridlock throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which has a significant impact on the Town's plans for growth and overall economic competitiveness.

Our goal is to create an innovative, transportation system that unlocks Caledon's potential for both residential and employment growth, Thompson said.

I think I have more questions than anything, Thompson told the Citizen Monday.

They included questions about the smaller corridor. Where did that one come from? he wondered.

He was also annoyed at the amount of money that's been spent on the EA; a job that will not be completed.

It's all useful information, he declared, commenting it could benefit the Town and Peel Region, as well as King Township, City of Vaughan and York Region. There's a lot of good information. That's why we bought into it.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones expressed frustration with the news, although she also said she wasn't surprised.

There's a standard joke in government that you release bad news on a Friday afternoon, she observed, adding this would be bad news for anyone in a car trying to get someplace in the GTA.

She also said that Metrolinx, an agency of the government, has stated congestion in the GTA will cost some \$7 billion per year by 2031, yet the government called off the EA.

That's insane, she declared, adding the government should complete a project it's already spent more than \$14 million on.

Jones also was frustrated that the lands near the Corridor have been frozen for years because of the study, and now there's going to be a new, narrower corridor, which again means further delays.

She was also puzzled that Transportation Minister Kathryn McGarry would be interested in keeping lands available for utilities, etc.

The Minister of Transportation is now in the infrastructure business? she wondered sarcastically, also pointing out that any new infrastructure going into that narrower corridor will be subject of another EA.

Just finish the job! she said.

She pointed out landowners along the Corridor have been waiting for a decision, and they haven't received it.

Jones agreed some people will be happy a highway won't be running through their properties, but that's all.

It hasn't solved anything, she declared. If people were looking for closure and completion, they haven't received it with this announcement.

This is not a decision, she added. They've kicked it down the road again.

But not all the reaction has been negative.

Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence, applauded the news, calling the proposed highway unnecessary.

Stopping this highway is a game changer, he stated. Shifting the billions this highway would have cost to public transit will benefit far more people, improve the health of our communities and reduce carbon pollution.

He added building a highway would have represented the old-style approach to transportation planning.

?Studies have shown that when a highway is built, more people drive, which adds to congestion, air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions,? Gray said. ?By investing in public transit, biking infrastructure, and more efficient goods movement we can shift to building healthy walkable communities.?

?This is an exciting time for transportation in our province,? McGarry said. ?We're planning for unprecedented growth in the region, with more people and more jobs, by investing in a well-planned, connected and innovative transportation system that can adapt to changing times. We have an obligation to respond to new and emerging technologies that impact the movement of people and goods, and we want to be sure that we make the right choices for this region. I would like to thank our advisory panel for their work, and for helping us to envision a transportation system that meets the needs of today and tomorrow.?