

Investing in transit would solve more problems than 413, says Green Party leader

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As opposition to Highway 413 continues to grow, Ontario Green Party Leader Mike Schreiner has been trumpeting the concerns that come with the Ford government moving forward with the proposed project.

In a recent statement, Schreiner pointed out that the issues go beyond the impact the highway will have on the environment and food production,.

'Greens have been calling for the cancellation of Highway 413 since it was first reintroduced by Ford because it threatens our food security and greenspace,' said Schreiner.

Schreiner is one of the leading voices in the fight against Highway 413 and spoke with the Caledon Citizen about why there is a better way of dealing with the truck traffic issues.

'So many people have said how can it possibly make sense to build a highway that's going to pave over 2,000 acres of farmland, 400 acres of the Green Belt, threaten wetlands and watersheds to only save commuters 30 seconds?' he said. 'It makes no sense.'

Knowing that there is a legitimate concern with truck traffic that will need to be dealt with, Schreiner points to some alternative options that won't have the same detrimental impacts on the area and are proven solutions to addressing the problem.

'We need to improve transportation in the region,' he said. 'Building a GO Station and extending GO to Bolton would make a lot of sense. Recognizing that there is a lot of truck traffic in the region and using some of that money to negotiate and arrange with the 407 to provide a truck lane because the 407 is under-utilized. Investing in better regional transit, period, study after study has shown that investing in transit addresses gridlock and investing in more highways just leads to more gridlock.'

'Investing in a highway is not going to solve the transportation issues in the Region; investing in transit will. Additionally, we have a repair backlog in our schools that the money could go to. We've seen a huge humanitarian crisis in our long-term care homes, and we need to invest in better care for elders. There's a whole host of things that I think are of higher priority investments for us rather than spending it on a highway that's not needed and will create a significant amount of environmental destruction and threaten our food and farming economy.'

With COVID-19 leaving a lasting effect on the economy, it seems irresponsible in Schreiner's eyes to spend billions on a highway when it could be invested in sectors of greater importance.

'Given the challenging fiscal situation the province is in right now, there's a lot of people wondering why we would spend \$6 to \$10 billion on a highway that's only going to save commuters 30 seconds,' he said. 'That money could be better spent on other priorities.'

One of the bigger concerns that comes with the highway is the snowball effect it will have with more sprawling residential and commercial development which can ultimately lead to tougher conditions and bigger costs as a result of climate change.

'This to me seems like 1950s development,' he said. 'Which isn't what people want in 2021, nor is it financially or environmentally sustainable. The infrastructure costs of servicing sprawl are huge and we're starting to really experience that especially now that some of the infrastructure built in the 1950s is needing to be replaced. It's so expensive to service sprawl. The second issue is the pressure it starts putting on the need to build infrastructure to protect us from flooding.'

'We know that the scientists and the insurance actuaries are saying that the costs associated with flooding are likely going to triple over the next decade because of extreme weather events from the climate crisis. If you continue to pave over the earth's ability to absorb that excess water, it's only going to make the flooding risk worse. Right now, the average cost to fix a flooded basement is \$43,000 and that presents a significant financial risk to people. Generally, most insurance estimates have the public insurance loss three times the amount of the private insurance loss—that poses a really significant financial risk to both municipal and provincial budgets.'

On the positive side, Schreiner has seen opposition to the highway grow over the last year but notes that it needs to continue until the 413 is cancelled by the Ford government.

'Last summer when the government announced that they were essentially going to fast track the environmental assessment process for Highway 413, I started doing news conferences in Peel Region,' he said. 'Just to start raising awareness that the Peel plain is prime agricultural land and paving over it for the highway and the sprawl that will likely result from the highway is a direct threat to our food security and the food and farming economy—which employs over 800,000 people and contributes \$50 billion to our GDP—and it increases the risks that are associated with flooding. At that time, there were few people who were talking about it and I felt a bit like a lone voice speaking out against the highway, but we just kept plugging away.'

'Now you have a number of municipal councils who have come out against it, regional councillors have come out against it, councils that previously supported it are now against it or at least calling for a federal environmental assessment. I remember one of the local mayors saying to me last summer, 'Hey Mike I agree with you, this highway doesn't make sense, but there's no way you're going to stop this.' Now to see how much the public opposition has grown and to see the Liberal and NDP jumping on the bandwagon and being opposed to the highway, just shows me that if something doesn't make sense and you come out strongly against it then you can build momentum in the opposition against it.'

For those wanting to help stop the 413, Schreiner says they need to continue writing to their local and provincial politicians.

'I tell people to keep writing the Premier's office, keep writing your local MPPs, and I used to tell people to write their municipal councillors, but most of them have come out and opposed it now,' he said. 'It's really about putting pressure on the Ford government to shelve this highway because it makes no sense and there's more important priorities to invest in.'