

Missed Opportunities

by SHERALYN ROMAN

At one point in this space, I believe I spoke briefly about the proposed Highway 413 and while generally speaking I try to maintain some semblance of neutrality on many issues, it's fair to say I'm not a fan. Being the 'typical Libra' that I am, I very much find myself constantly weighing two sides of every issue to measure the pros and cons, and to do my research accordingly.

Occasionally however, such as when reading 'The Saturday Debate' in The Toronto Star this past weekend, frustration supersedes reason. The debate was a glaring missed opportunity to examine alternatives to simply paving over the Greenbelt and, in so doing, threatening headwaters and wildlife habitats not just now but for generations to come - all in the name of saving somebody, somewhere, 30 to 60 seconds off their daily commute.

Frank Clayton, author of the 'Yes' argument, suggests the benefits of the highway 'outweigh any costs.' Any? To me, 'any' seems like a pretty high price to pay. According to Ryan Norris, a Professor of Biology at University of Guelph and representing the 'No' side, we are talking about putting as many as 35 species of concern at risk, destroying ponds used by the already endangered Jefferson salamander amongst other wetland creatures and laying waste to farmland, as well as the 'headwaters of Sixteen Mile Creek, the Credit River and the Humber River, which are critical for maintaining healthy ecosystems?' such as YOURS and MY access to clean drinking water.

All this, for about 50kms of highway that pretty much runs parallel to an already existing and completely underutilized multi-lane highway just a few kilometres south of the proposed route for the 413.

We are at what we hope is the tail end of global pandemic. Many families used this opportunity to re-evaluate their lives, embraced the concept of working from home and have migrated north from the big city. As a result, traffic has increased in the 905 and on that Mr. Clayton and I agree.

In cities he suggests, folks 'don't need a car and many use transit, walk or cycle.' In the 905 however, Clayton writes 'the reality is cars will continue to be the main form of transportation,' therefore 'more road capacity will be absolutely essential.' Generally, he's not wrong about the current mindset towards vehicle reliance but that's a mindset and one that needs to change, one that enhanced access to public transportation could help with.

To be fair, Clayton touches on the topic of public transportation, citing the 2041 Regional Transportation Plan by Metrolinx, which points out the plan will merely maintain rather than increase reliance on public transit. This result will come despite an excess of \$30 billion dollars in investments. The missed opportunity to Clayton's 'Yes' argument is that rather than call on the government to increase funding (say perhaps by taking the billions of dollars allocated to the building of the 413) and allocating it instead toward further public transit enhancements, Clayton simply reiterates the need for more highways.

He asks this question: 'If not the proposed Highway 413, where else can we build the road capacity needed to accommodate the massive growth in car trips and truck traffic in the GTA?' In answer, I'll say it again, how about we look south, to the 407, a highway that cuts an enormous swath through not just the GTA but all the way to Burlington in the west end and to the #35/#115 to the east.

There are, according to the 407's own website, a total of 198 conveniently located entrance/exit ramps spaced out over approx. 150 kms of roadway. It travels through Vaughan, just south of Caledon, connects cars to the 401 at Trafalgar Rd essentially covering the same route as the proposed 413. That's a lot of highway and the only real issue is that it's a toll road.

Mr. Clayton has missed an opportunity to encourage us all to think creatively about expanded use of the 407 and promote enhancements to public transit. What we know to be 'reality' is only because we are being short sighted in envisioning a future that

doesn't rely so heavily on the vehicle. Just two years ago, Zoom meetings were a novelty and few people thought we could conduct business simply relying on technology and by working from home. It hasn't been without hiccups but it has now become an accepted way of life.

Improving public transit across the 905, making it accessible, affordable and easy to use will in turn help to ensure it is better utilized. People in Toronto use public transit because it is there AND it's easy to use. We must do the same across the 905. It's imperative that we explore, as Norris suggests, 'emissions-free mobility solutions' including light rail, electric buses and bus rapid transit 'and low carbon ways to move freight. Ontario's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions is transportation...' building another highway will only exacerbate the problem.

It's time to think creatively about our reliance on vehicles. It's time to ask big business to bear some of the costs of moving goods across already existing roads and/or reduce or eliminate tolls on the 407 for truck traffic reducing volume on other existing highways like the 401. It's time to put more emphasis on public transportation as a reliable and easily accessible means of getting to and from work, should that day ever come.

It's NOT time to build a mere 50 kms of redundant expressway across precious resource land, disrupting our ecosystem, farmland, endangered wildlife and sources of clean water. Let's not miss this opportunity to get it right. Mr. Norris said it best; 'Future generations will thank us.'