

Paving Paradise to Put Up a Highway

By **Martina Rowley**

OPINION

Drawing on a Joni Mitchell song from the 1970s, Big Yellow Taxi, 'they paved paradise / and put up a parking lot?', the lyrics sum up the ridiculous and destructive plans by the Province of Ontario to revisit building a new highway through our local Greenbelt.

Plans for Highway 413 are controversial and had been shelved by the previous provincial leader, yet the current Ford government is, as we know, very keen on working with developers, regardless of the environmental impact and detriment to taxpayers.

First off, the stupidity of this plan is that the proposed new highway would run just 15km north of the existing and currently underused Highway 407 for a short 50km stretch. Called a GTA West Highway, its goal is to be an east-west bypass of Vaughan and Brampton and merge with the 407 in Mississauga. In truth, it would save commuters only a few minutes of driving time. Is that really worth \$6 billion in construction cost and our tax dollars? I think not!

Furthermore, the environmental impact would include paving over 2,000 acres of Class 1 and Class 2 land among Ontario's most productive farmland as well as forests, wetlands and essentially a portion of the supposedly protected Greenbelt. It would end up degrading parts of the Credit River and Humber River watersheds that flow south into Lake Ontario, which is the source of drinking water for millions of GTA residents. And nobody should mess with that basic human right of access to clean and safe drinking water. It is akin to cutting your nose to spite your face, so does this look like a provincial government that cares about individual municipalities and their residents' needs? No, not one bit. In typical bull-in-a-china-shop fashion, Premier Ford is pushing this construction forward without completing full environmental assessments and ignoring decisions and recommendations from his predecessors' expert advisory panel.

Without a full environmental assessment, we wouldn't even know the scale of the damage to the Greenbelt until it has indeed been paved over.

An environmental assessment looks at the potential impact of a built project on the land, air, waterways, as well as all wildlife that would be affected. Then recommendations are made on how to reduce or eliminate these impacts. The process includes public consultations, so residents affected by the construction are aware of the facts and the potential or expected impact, which gives them the opportunity to express their support or objection. Importantly, the Minister of Environment then decides if the project can proceed or not.

Premier Ford is ignoring this transparent and science-based process. He has a track record of ignoring environmental impacts from development and gives developers the power to ignore scientific advice above authorities and processes that exist to protect our environment.

Understandably, Toronto-based organisation Environmental Defence is mad as hell and fighting Highway 413 tooth-and-nail by educating the public and providing lawn signs and online petitions against the construction.

A slew of community groups, farmers' unions and coalitions along the proposed route are equally up in arms. It is noteworthy that the Councils of Orangeville, Halton Hills, Halton Region, Mississauga and just recently Toronto have officially voted against the construction. Brampton, Caledon and Peel Region are in favour but have at least voted to call for a federal environment assessment. So, there is hope that they too will come to their senses.

A related nightmare is the plan for a new Holland Marsh Highway (Bradford Bypass), which would carve through the extremely fertile farmland of the Holland Marsh, which feeds all of us in Ontario and beyond. That is another story.

It doesn't have to be this way. While I understand how frustrated Caledon residents must be about the active sand and gravel quarry off Highway 10 and related heavy truck traffic, this new highway cannot be the right solution.

Building the 413 would encourage urban sprawl, increase reliance on cars and cause a great deal of environmental destruction that would affect millions of Ontarians. Instead, the \$6 billion construction cost could be used far more wisely and inclusively for expansion of public transit. Because Highway 407 has sufficient capacity to take on more traffic by including a designated lane for trucks only, it is truly blind sighted to ignore its availability.

We, as affected citizens, can help stop this madness by urging our local Councils and the federal government to designate both projects for full federal environmental assessments. To do so, they need to hear that there is public concern. Look up Environmentaldefence.ca for more information and to get a lawn sign in support, and I call on local environmental groups to make this a priority as part of their groups' efforts to protect our local area and interests. Let us not pave over our green paradise.