

Region wants Metrolinx funding from all over the province

By Bill Rea

Peel Regional council does not support the use of municipal finance tools to fund Metrolinx plans.

Councillors last Thursday voted to accept the recommendations put forth by Regional staff. This came after a rather lengthy debate, during which several speakers mentioned a number of possible adjustments. But everything came to an abrupt end when Mississauga Councillor Pat Mullin asked that the vote be taken. It was.

Metrolinx is the agency created by the Province to improve the coordination and integration of all modes of transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). The agency has the job of implementing a long-term transportation plan for GTHA, known as The Big Move, and Regional staff added it's charged with the task of coming up with an investment strategy outlining how these plans are to be implemented and financed.

The Big Move is a 25-year plan that's slated to be implemented in two waves, and it's estimated the whole thing is going to cost \$50 billion.

Metrolinx, earlier this year, produced a list of investment tools that could be used to fund this work. The agency's consultants initially came up with 25 ideas, but that was reduced to a short list of 11. Various stakeholders, including municipalities, have been asked to offer their input. Caledon's position, arrived at earlier this month, favoured use of a fuel tax and increase to the Provincial sales tax, but there was also a stipulation that these provisions had to be province-wide, not just GTHA.

Other ideas on the short list included development charges for Metrolinx, a parking space levy, highway tolls for new 400-series highways, high-occupancy tolls, vehicle kilometres travel fees (in which motorists are charged for every kilometre they drive in certain areas), transit fare increases, property taxes and an employer payroll tax.

Regional staff reported they had looked at the use of property taxes to fund this, agreeing it has strong revenue potential and is easy to implement. But they argued that would place a greater burden on Peel residents and businesses. "Public opinion in the GTHA is currently against Metrolinx's proposed revenue tools, with strong disapproval for the use of property taxes," they added.

Staff also wasn't too taken with the idea of using development charges to fund this, pointing out it would add to the cost of housing in the region.

Caledon Councillor Richard Paterak observed the staff recommendations spelled out what the Region didn't want, but not what it wanted. He pointed out Caledon put forth its preferences and he stressed the need for Peel to state its position clearly.

"We have to speak up, or the Province is going to make decisions and we will not have said what our position is," he said.

Caledon Mayor Marolyn Morrison was adamant that the funding methods adopted for the Metrolinx plans have to see the money dedicated to them, and not dumped into the Province's coffers.

She also stressed the Town's position that if sales or gas taxes are used, they have to be province-wide. Otherwise, such taxes will have huge impacts to countryside communities in GTHA, like Caledon. She said people close to municipal boundaries will step outside the GTHA for their gas and other goods.

She also pointed out Metrolinx's plans will involve places like Barrie, Guelph and Waterloo, so they should pay too.

"It would be nice to know all the facts before we took a stand," Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion commented. "Otherwise, we're confusing the public."

McCallion complained that Metrolinx was late coming out with its list, adding the municipalities should have had to chance to study it and present it to the public.

"Let's wait for the (Metrolinx) report, and then let's do our homework," she urged. "Let's get our teeth in it in a big way, and take it to the public."

She also expressed the hope that Metrolinx would make available all its information and research.

Brampton Mayor Susan Fennell said everyone agrees the Province needs to be told that dealing with gridlock has to be a priority. She also stressed the need that tools used in this project have to be dedicated to just that, adding federal transfer payments could be a useful tool.

She also said that everyone supports maintaining the economic viability of the GTA. "It's not our role to ne a veil for a decision made at the Province," she commented.