

Town states Metrolinx plans not addressing Caledon's needs

By Bill Rea

When it comes to financing Metrolinx's plans, Caledon council prefers a province-wide fuel tax or increase to the sales tax. But councillors weren't in complete agreement on that. The comments they ended up agreeing to send out included a message for the Province that Caledon's immediate needs are not being met in this process.

The decision came after a lengthy, and sometimes heated, discussion at last Tuesday's council meeting.

Town staff reported Metrolinx received a list of 25 potential revenue tools from their consultants, and they reduced that to a short list of 11.

Town staff had initially favoured the two province-wide initiatives accepted by council, along with development charges for Metrolinx, a parking space levy and highway tolls for new 400-series highways.

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.

Staff said the first wave of projects in the plan is slated to cost more than \$16 billion, with the next wave expected to cost about \$34 billion.

Other revenue tools on the short list included 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.

Addressing the possible fuel tax, staff said it would be collected from gas stations in GTHA and go to Metrolinx, while money from stations outside GTHA should be redistributed to municipalities to support transit infrastructure. The proposed sales tax increase would be collected and distributed much the same way. They also pointed out Metrolinx has just proposed these taxes for the GTHA.

Staff stated they were recommending the development charge proposal only if legislation is amended to require all municipalities in the area to collect these additional levies.

Councillor Richard Paterak said he would prefer the sales tax option. "It is the most robust way to raise money," he said, adding a fuel tax imposed just inside GTHA wouldn't work.

Town Treasure Fuwing Wong told Councillor Nick deBoer an employer payroll tax would be like the Employer Health Tax, and staff wasn't recommending that because of the impact it could have on small businesses.

DeBoer added a fuel tax would have to include a portion for rural infrastructure.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli was pleased with the province-wide focus from staff, as he pointed out everyone stands to benefit from The Big Move.

But he also pointed out Caledon won't directly benefit from any of the projects in the first wave, yet the extra taxes would be collected here and passed on to Metrolinx. But taxes will be paid in municipalities to the north and Caledon will get nothing for its roads and bridges.

"That's a bit of a difficult one for Caledon," he remarked.

Councillor Doug Beffort objected to supporting any of these ideas, pointing out he had no idea what his constituents would think about them. He added the Town was being asked to increase taxes on the community.

Paterak commented that there is a dedicated gas tax in the United States, with the money going toward interstates and mass transit. "The tank is running dry," he observed, pointing out people are driving less and making more use of hybrids and electric cars. Such a tax doesn't offer the same rate of return any more, he remarked.

Councillor Richard Whitehead had some concerns too.

"We're handed a shopping list and asked to react to it," he commented. "That's a slippery slope."

He pointed out Metrolinx has a narrow mandate, adding that once the Town responds, it becomes part of the process. He also stressed the need to go back to the fundamentals, pointing out there has to be some direct benefit to Caledon. He said the Town's job is to make the road traffic system work here, not make mass transit work someplace else.

"I don't think any of these tools work at this time, save and except development charges," he commented, adding he wasn't sure they would work because of restrictions on how they can be accessed.

He also said he couldn't support any of the tools until the Province demonstrates some commitment to completing the Highway 427 extension and a "reasonable date" for a GO train station here.

"I have fundamental problems with this report," Whitehead added. "I don't see us getting anything out of it."

Councillor Gord McClure was more supportive of the staff position.

"I think users should pay," he said, adding the Province can't afford to build roads now and needs some source of money.

Whitehead said he's spoken to constituents, and there's very little call for a transit solution because Caledon residents won't be able to use it.

"None of this is a transportation solution for them," he said. "A better highway would be."

Mezzapelli argued that roads would serve Caledon in the short-term, but many residents work elsewhere in the GTHA, and that's where the benefit will be. He also said money from fuel and sales taxes will stay in the GTHA.

Councillor Patti Foley was concerned that rejecting the staff recommendation would mean the Town has no voice on the issue. Wong agreed, telling her that Metrolinx is mandated to have a report ready by June 1. If Caledon doesn't offer comments, then it has no input.

"I refuse to stick my head in the sand," Mayor Marolyn Morrison remarked. "I think we need to have input."

She also said she sent the Metrolinx short list to all the councillors well ahead of the meeting for input, and she heard nothing from any of them.

The Mayor stressed that any money going to Metrolinx has to be dedicated funds, and not just going into the general revenues of the Province. And she too stressed the fuel and sales taxes have to be province-wide.

Whitehead agreed there has to be some comment from the Town, but it also has to include a message to the Province that Caledon's needs are not being addressed.

"If I don't vote for this, I don't have a say; and I can't believe that," Beffort commented. He was the only councillor to vote against the final motion.