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Transit improvements will come at a cost

By Brock Weir

Ontario Politicians could be spurred into action next week debating the next big steps for The Big Move, the multi-billion dollar transit plan proposed by Metrolinx to improve access to public transit in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA).

Metrolinx, the arm of the provincial government which oversees, among other things, GO Transit, was tasked with finding a way to ?dramatically overhaul? transit systems in southern Ontario in 2007. They looked not only to the hassle some people might find in having access to public transportation, but also economic impact of traffic gridlock, where people are sitting for hours in a jam waiting to get to work and the lost revenue that means to both them and their employers.

?Once highly regarded, the GTHA transportation system is no longer meeting the needs of the area's residents and businesses,? said Metrolinx in their report. ?Some of the symptoms of this are clearly evident in our congested roads and highways, gridlocked urban streets, unreliable and inconvenient transit, and a lack of safe bikeways and pedestrian pathways. Other symptoms are less easy to see ? the economic disruption from congestion, the hindrance of trade and the movement of goods, the increased number of smog days, the toll on individuals and families from commutes that take way too long, the ever-increasing share of the family budget devoted to basic transportation. Things need to change.?

The report cites underinvestment by successive governments in local transportation systems throughout the GTHA, an inefficient use of the existing road and highway system, and increased growth and urbanization.

Their 25-year vision for local transportation focuses on providing a wide range of options for people and expanding to places not already or sporadically serviced, and more for children and seniors, increased frequency and reliability, with a boost to active transportation in making it easier for people cycle or walk.

This will be carried out through nine goals, ranging from stepping up efforts for an efficient rapid transit network throughout the region, walking and cycling networks with bike sharing, an integrated transit fare system, a better system of ?connected mobility hubs? and instituting stable and predictable transit funding throughout the province.

But all this, of course, comes with a price, and that will be shouldered by the people, whether users, the people most effected by the current problems, or the taxpayers in general. While they propose a number of ways (taxes) people can fund the big move, dubbed ?revenue tools?, one thing Aurora lawmakers and business advocates agreed on was increasing property taxes to make it happen was not an option.

?High potential options would be highway tolls and a fuel tax,? said Judy Marshall, Chief Executive Officer of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, which worked in conjunction with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce to make a number of recommendations on what will work best for local business communities. She noted times spent waiting in traffic gridlock for deliveries and other problems have an economic hit in the tens of billions.

?When we looked at some of the other ones like a commercial parking levy or a high occupancy toll [for non-high occupancy drivers], to put a process in place to gather the tax would be horrendous.

?In terms of the non-starters, we looked at property tax, payroll tax, vehicle kilometres travelled. Again, it was just too hard to implement. Putting on an employer payroll tax would impede employment when it is so important right now.?

Highway tolls and fuel tax, she told The Auroran, wouldn't be a strain on local businesses and those rose to the top.

?We don't want to put another tax on the actual employer and if the riders are going to use it, they're going to have to pay as well,? she added.

Potential new taxes were also a hot button issue when Regional Council met Thursday in Newmarket.

Many around the table agreed it was time to take a harder position on the types of ?revenue tools? they would like to see implemented. Various opinions on the issue were put out there including concerns whether giving commuters the option to take underused HOV lanes for free would defeat their purpose and compound problems for commuters; making sure any financial burdens are shouldered by drivers and not transit users; re-opening laws pertaining to development charges so they can be used towards funding transit development due to growth; and from Georgina Mayor Rob Grossi, a 1 per cent province wide sales tax dedicated specifically for The Big Move.

?We need to stop using the term ?revenue tools' and call it what it is ? taxes,? said Mayor Geoffrey Dawe at the meeting. ?Let's stop gilding the lily. We all know it is going to come from one place. I am happy to second Mayor Grossi's motion for a province-wide sales tax.

?The regions outside Hamilton and Toronto agree that we need to do something and we know it is going to benefit our residents as well as benefit their residents, but we can't be stepping up to anything until Toronto and Hamilton say we are a part of this as well, then we can truly say we all agree something needs to be done.?