

HST boost for 'Big Move' should be province-wide, says Mayor

By Brock Weir

As politicians continue to get a handle on the significant recommendations made by Metrolinx last week to fund extensive new transit and highway infrastructure to get people on the move, some politicians are finding accord on at least one recommendation.

The recommendations under 'The Big Move', as The Auroran reported last week, will go towards funding tens of billions of dollars of transit infrastructure in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) over the next decade. Metrolinx, the arm of the provincial government which oversees, among other things, GO Transit, made their recommendations on how to pay for it to the Ontario Legislature last Monday.

Such initiatives include rapid transit bus lanes, subway extensions into York Region, significant improvements to GO Transit, and improvements to local transit projects, highways, roads, and active transportation options, including trails and cycling lanes.

Their seven recommendations to get enough funding to make it a reality, however, have left some politicians seeing red. These include a one percent tax increase to the HST, a 5 cent per litre Regional Fuel and Gasoline Tax, a business parking levy, high occupancy toll lanes, pay parking at transit hubs, a 15 per cent increase in development charges, and land value capture.

Almost right off the bat, however, Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty threw water on any suggestion that a potential increase in Ontario's HST could apply solely to the GTHA. His position is in accord with Aurora Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, who voiced his support of the increase, but only if it is Ontario-wide.

Citing The Auroran's interview with MPP Frank Klees on the matter last week, he agreed with his stance, a stance which Mayor Dawe made clear at last month's meeting at Regional Council, that it is time to stop calling Metrolinx' suggestions as 'revenue tools' and cut to the chase and call them what they are at face value.

'They are taxes,' he says. 'I do support the province-wide sales tax and not a GTHA-wide sales tax. The reality is a healthy, economic Toronto benefits everyone. That is just the reality. I am not in favour of either the Regional fuel tax or the parking lot levy. You're penalizing the people who you are trying to get on the train to do that.'

'If you're looking at public parking, I don't know how you would enforce something like that. I have no concept of how you would do that, so you just whack the ball for a bunch of dough whether people are parking there or not. I don't agree with that.'

Looking at the bigger picture, however, Mayor Dawe says there needs to be a Canada-wide solution to the current and growing transit problem, including a Canada-wide transportation study. In his view, the most successful cities in the world that have successful transit and transportation systems have a substantial level of Federal funding.

'This is a consumer tax and I think that is the easiest way to support it,' he concluded. 'No one likes new taxes, but I think you have to step back and say, do we want transit? Is that something we, as a society, want to have? If we want to have it, we have to step up and pay for it.'

'If we don't want to have it, that is a different story.'