

IN GOOD COMPANY: No Quick Fixes

No quick fixes for transit in Greater Toronto **By Mayor Geoffrey Dawe**

On April 17, I joined 300 political leaders, businesspeople, representatives from community groups and others from across Greater Toronto at Exhibition Place to participate in a discussion on transit funding.

The forum was convened by CivicAction, a coalition of civic leaders from across the Toronto region that addresses environmental, economic and other issues relating to the overall health, stability and sustainability of the Toronto region.

Since October, CivicAction has been campaigning on the need to find new sources of transit funding in an effort to relieve traffic congestion across southern Ontario that has often been cited as among the worst in North America.

In their 2008 study, *Costs of Road Congestion in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area*, Metrolinx, the Government of Ontario's transportation body responsible for co-ordinating and integrating modes of transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, pegged the staggering cost of traffic congestion at \$3.3 billion in environmental impacts, increased vehicle costs from travel delays and increased costs of vehicle collisions. They further gauged the economic costs to gross domestic product at \$2.7 billion.

Inaction, the Metrolinx report suggested, could see these costs spiral to \$7.8 billion and \$7.1 billion respectively by 2031.

There have been many studies assessing the impact of traffic congestion on everything from economic output to impact on personal lives. While it is exceedingly difficult to accurately quantify these costs, what becomes abundantly clear is that by any financial, social or other measure, traffic congestion is a serious problem that is only getting worse.

In 2008, Metrolinx unveiled *The Big Move*, a \$50-billion inter-regional plan for transit and transportation improvements across southern Ontario.

York Region is on the forefront of these plans, constructing dedicated rapid transit lanes along Yonge Street and Highway 7, as well as expanding the Spadina subway into the City of Vaughan.

York Region is financing their bold transit plan, largely from local funding and funds matched from senior levels of government. This translates into a big ?bite? on the property tax bills of our ratepayers.

Despite being one of the fastest growing and rapidly urbanizing areas in Canada, York Region is in a favourable position to learn from the growing pains experienced by our larger urban neighbours. York Regional Council is eager to avoid the experiences of communities like Mississauga, where authorities are scrambling to build transit years after a sustained population boom.

York Region is making difficult choices to invest in a comprehensive transit system before population densities rapidly increase.

While York Region is moving forward, other communities find themselves in a difficult position funding transit and transportation infrastructure.

CivicAction Chairman John Tory has suggested that 80 per cent of the \$50 billion identified for Metrolinx's *Big Move* remains unfunded. With few apparent revenue tools, questions abound on how this financial vacuum will be filled.

The CivicAction forum and recently-released Metrolinx report, *Big Move Implementation Economics: Revenue Tool Profiles*, outlined a number of potential revenue tools, including various combinations of taxes and tolls. All are a good starting point for a long-overdue discussion on transit and transportation financing. That is, all expect property taxes and development charges!

Critics have suggested these options lack innovation or are too convenient, in that they simply shift responsibility to our already overburdened taxpayers. The reality of the situation is that, in one way or another, we all have to pay for transit. Transit is not

profitable. In the absence of this, whether it is through government coffers, taxes or service charges, we all end up paying.

This is the frustrating element of the transit discussion. We have had the ability to move forward with transit plans for decades. Cost has been the prohibitive factor. We either choose to pay for transit and transportation infrastructure or we learn to live with the negative costs of traffic congestion.

At the CivicAction forum, I saw a noticeable shift in attitudes toward transit funding. We seem to be reaching a tipping point where government, businesses and our residents will no longer tolerate the status quo on gridlock. It is refreshing to see some movement here but hard choices will have to be made. I am hopeful that when our subway and rapidways are built and functioning here in York Region, people will see the benefit of investing in transit and make those hard choices.

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A special word of thanks to the many residents who braved a windy and snowy Saturday to help clean-up Aurora at the Mayor's Anti-Litter Day on April 20. Thanks as well to our sponsors Tim Hortons, Pitch-in Canada, Info Aurora and Water for Tomorrow for their support.

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With May just around the corner, I welcome residents to join our Aurora 150 Tattoo celebration on Sunday, May 5. Have lunch with the Queen's York Rangers from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Machell Park and participate in a kid-friendly ?mudder? obstacle course from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Tattoo will take place with a host of bands with pipes and drums at the Aurora Community Centre from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Admission to the Tattoo is free but seating is limited. It will be a great day of family fun. See you there!