

Toronto transit plan praised, but capacity a concern

Don Wall April 16, 2019



FORDNATION/FACEBOOK—Ontario Premier Doug Ford announced a new Toronto transit plan at the GO Transit Willowbrook Rail Maintenance Facility in east Toronto on April 10.

Construction stakeholders hailed the Ontario government’s announcement to move forward on \$28.5 billion in new transit projects for the Toronto region, calling the plan to undertake several newly envisioned and expanded projects “ambitious” and “huge” — but with caveats.

“Finally, someone is saying it’s time to get off our butts and get building,” said Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA).

“When it comes to transportation and moving people, it has been a fragmented system for years with each area competing with each other and different groups involved, unable to move forward. It was time for somebody to take the reins.”

Ian Cunningham, president of the Council of Ontario Construction Associations and **Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO)**, both praised the news, but Cunningham raised issues of work capacity while

Manahan said it was unlikely that Metrolinx had done its typical business case analysis on the new Ontario Line, leaving questions unanswered at this stage.

“Lots of money and lots of work is a good thing for the construction industry,” said Cunningham. “But it will present a challenge in terms of capacity.”

Commented Manahan, “I am pleasantly surprised. But the devil will be in the details.”

Premier Doug Ford, Infrastructure Minister Monte McNaughton and Transportation Minister Jeff Yurek announced the new plans in east Toronto April 10. The biggest news was that the government will replace the previously announced downtown relief line with the new 15-kilometre Ontario Line that will run from Ontario Place in the west to the Ontario Science Centre in the northeast — double the distance, at a total cost of \$10.9 billion.

The new line would incorporate new technology with lighter trains and tracks both under and above ground.

Other highlights include plans to extend the Scarborough subway three stops, take the Yonge subway line to Richmond Hill and extend the Eglinton line west to Pearson airport. The three projects were costed at \$5.5 billion, \$5.6 billion and \$4.7 billion respectively.

The ministers pledged the Ontario Line will be built by 2027, two years earlier than the original relief line plan.

Funding sources are still uncertain and Ford reiterated his plan to upload Toronto’s capital transit projects from the city to the province.

Thurston said the OGCA and the Construction and Design Alliance of Ontario have been consulting with the government, Infrastructure Ontario (IO) and Metrolinx on procurement issues, and they have been assured they will continue to be involved as the government considers innovative strategies project-by-project such as integrated project delivery.

“We and Infrastructure Ontario are well positioned to take on this responsibility in partnership with the rest of the industry and that is the important thing,” said Thurston.

“There is a great opportunity to think outside the box.”

Thurston said what will likely happen is larger firms will partner with smaller firms to extend capacity in the sector.

“We have the expertise and the people to plan this right, to schedule it and roll it out,” he said.

Cunningham suggested with the influx of all the new work, on top of other major projects such as the \$10-billion-plus GO RER program, there may need to be an influx of foreign firms and even foreign workers to get the builds done.

“The minister of infrastructure has said to me a number of times they would like to attract more foreign contractors to bring innovation and some price competitiveness to the market in Ontario,” he said.

Cunningham noted the “Ford Plan” is very ambitious and represents more transit than Toronto had planned for.

“The government thinks they can build a lot of these transit lines concurrently,” he said. “I hope so. It is a lot of work. I am optimistic we will be able to train people up. I would think we would have to import labour to get it done.”

The labour force issue is complicated by the fact the province is still designing a plan to develop a new trades apprenticeship system after shutting down the Ontario College of Trades, Cunningham said.

“But it is a can-do business. The industry will work like heck to get it done on time and on budget.”

Manahan said he had confidence IO and Metrolinx could provide proper oversight, despite the “hiccups” the agencies had experienced with the Eglinton Crosstown job.

As for project analysis, OGCA director of government relations David Frame suggested it’s not the role of contractors to assess the policy merits of the new suite of transit lines, saying, “The government decides where priorities are and how much money is going to be spent to get the job done, that’s a political decision.”

Manahan said despite the short timeline for drawing up a project like the Ontario Line, the word in the industry was that the government’s special adviser Michael Lindsay had done a thorough job of consulting with stakeholders.

“I don’t think this project was drawing a line on a map on a whim, I think there was a lot more thought put into it,” he said.

“But there is probably a lot more work that could be done.”

While his contacts said the idea of taking the Ontario Line to Ontario Place could be questioned in terms of potential ridership, Manahan said connecting the line with the Eglinton Crosstown on the northeast end was a “fantastic measure.”

Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships president and CEO Mark Romoff also praised the announcement in a statement but emphasized “it is important for the government to get shovels in the ground and start building these projects as quickly as possible.

“We know this government is committed to working with the private sector through public-private partnerships to ensure these projects are delivered with the greatest possible value for taxpayers. We look forward to helping move those discussions forward.”