

Metrolinx needs power to redraw transit map

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If the future of the GTA rides on any one thing, it may be Metrolinx.

The arm's-length public agency was created expressly to plan, build and operate a regional public transit system across the Greater Toronto Area. Needless to say, it's an idea whose time has long since come.

Although there's no doubt such a network is desperately needed, the province has yet to give Metrolinx the powers required to do the job.

That means many things, most importantly, money. The big question revolves around who pays for what, and whether Metrolinx should have the authority to tax.

At a conference held earlier this year, a trio of transit gurus – former TTC general manager David Gunn, University of Toronto civil engineer Richard Soberman and Trent University economist Harry Kitchen – argued that the greatest obstacle facing Metrolinx was governance, or rather, the lack thereof.

Their point was that the current mandate isn't clear about who's in charge. Given a culture in which even large public projects, especially large public projects such as transit, are politicized beyond recognition, the need for autonomy is essential.

One need look no further than the Sheppard subway line to see what can happen when politics takes over from planning.

And who could forget Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's out-of-the-blue proposal in his budget last February to establish a train line between Toronto and Peterborough? Coincidentally, it would have gone through Flaherty's riding, Whitby-Oshawa. The scheme has since been dropped.

To make matters worse, Metrolinx's task runs counter to decades of planning and transportation policy in Ontario. The province's historic focus on cars and highways, subdivisions and malls has left public transit almost irrelevant throughout much of the GTA.

Then there's the Metrolinx insistence on a regional perspective, something many jurisdictions consider a threat.

They say moving minds is harder than moving bodies, and Metrolinx will be the test. Compared to changing attitudes, construction is the easy part.

And although Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty has signalled his support for Metrolinx, including a promise of \$11.5 billion over 10 years, elements of the bureaucracy remain obdurate.

Compared to the federal government, however, Queen's Park represents enlightenment itself. Stephen Harper's administration, which has been asked for \$6 billion, has yet to acknowledge that Metrolinx exists, let alone pledge funds.

Regardless, two weeks ago, the plan approved by Metrolinx's board was presented to Queen's Park. A response is expected by spring.

Though it often seems we're sleepwalking through these problems, this time the pressure is on. The GTA's highways already operate at capacity; even if they didn't, the fact is we need to get people out of their vehicles.

In other words, we need the province to say yes – and soon. Though many would love to see Metrolinx stumble, the stakes are too high.

Ironically, the economic crisis could provide just the excuse our leaders need if they're serious in their sudden interest in infrastructure as a way out of recession. How better to spend public money than on public transit?

Still, the switch from cars and highways to trains and buses, from the past to the future, won't be easy. For many GTA residents, life wouldn't be possible without the single-person automobile. Despite their resistance, they have most to gain by Metrolinx.

Unlike earlier transportation plans, this one takes the big picture into account. Transit becomes more than a way of getting from A to B; instead, it will be a framework for growth. Though some might be frightened by the prospect of change, the alternatives are worse.