

11/22/2006

Editorial: Avert GTA gridlock

By: Editorial - Toronto Star

Few people starting a new job face dire challenges like those confronting former Burlington mayor Rob MacIsaac.

He begins work next month as the first head of the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority, with a mandate to get it up and running. In effect, he's the GTA's much-needed gridlock buster.

This central agency is ultimately supposed to plan highway expansion, co-ordinate the jumble of separate public transit systems serving the Greater Toronto Area, and fund essential new construction. But it hasn't yet been given the power or the money by Queen's Park and, to a lesser degree, Ottawa to fulfill that important mandate.

While MacIsaac is optimistic, his agency needs more support, faster.

The potentially crushing cost to the GTA of future gridlock is vividly outlined in a new study showing that, without dramatic improvements to vital transportation networks, regional commuters will face increasingly crippling traffic jams, rising pollution and lost jobs.

The City of Toronto alone will see 100,000 more cars on already-clogged roads and streets by 2031, according to study authors. And 50,000 more will ride public transit during the morning commute.

Even more vehicles are expected to take to the streets in the surrounding GTA, with 154,000 additional commuters emerging in Brampton; 146,000 in Markham, and 80,000 hitting the road in Vaughan.

Such an immense influx of vehicles could result in gridlock so extreme it would compel more companies to flee Toronto, taking valuable jobs with them.

Without a serious change of direction, including a rethinking of Toronto's official plan, this city "can probably kiss its aspirations for employment growth goodbye," warns Richard Soberman, the study's lead author.

The report, Transportation Challenges in the Greater Toronto Area, was funded by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario. Its proposals include building new roadways in Toronto. And it emphasizes the need for the kind of strong, independent transportation authority MacIsaac envisages.

Changes needed include:

Giving the new transportation authority control over billions of dollars in needed provincial and federal funding so that it would have the leverage to integrate fares and transit services.

Streamlining the environmental assessment process involved in new roads and transit systems, cutting opportunities for needless and costly obstruction.

Allocating stable, predictable, multi-year funding to the new authority, enabling it to effectively meet the GTA's long-term needs.

Failure to take action will cost the regional economy billions, and will impair the quality of life of hundreds of thousands of commuters across the region.

So far, the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority has been idling in neutral. But it is a necessary vehicle for delivering change. It must be powered up, and appropriately funded, without delay.