

Stintz calls for Metrolinx to be clear on Scarborough subway at mayoral debate

Tory takes shots for his SmartTrack plan at debate organized by Transport Futures

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Mayoral candidates Olivia Chow, John Tory, Karen Stintz and David Soknacki took part in a debate Monday organized by the group Transport Futures as part of its Solving Gridlock forum on transportation issues. (June 16, 2014)

With the election of the Liberals to a provincial majority government, the Scarborough subway debate is over, according to one Toronto mayoral candidate.

Karen Stintz also called on Metrolinx to clarify its position in supporting a three-stop subway extension of the Bloor-Danforth line into Scarborough, a move adopted by the former TTC chair and a majority of city council, as part of recent decision which reversed an earlier fully funded plan to replace the aging Scarborough RT with an LRT line.

“Right now with the majority government that’s been elected and the overwhelming support the Liberals got in Scarborough I think it is reasonable to say the subway debate is over and we need to now talk about other transit priorities,” said Stintz following a mayoral debate Monday, June 16, morning between her and fellow candidates Olivia Chow, John Tory and David Soknacki.

“Metrolinx has an opportunity to clarify and be clear the Scarborough subway will be built.”

Metrolinx, which is tasked with building several light rail projects as part of a master agreement with the city and the TTC, did not respond directly to Stintz’s comments. But spokesperson Anne Marie Aikins did acknowledge the decision to switch to the subway plan from the Scarborough LRT, which she said was supported by all levels of government.

“Three levels of government have made the decision to build a subway instead of an LRT in Scarborough and therefore, we are working closely with the city to make the appropriate amendments to the master agreement, said Aikins over email. The debate was organized by the group Transport Futures as part of a one-day infrastructure forum that brought together transportation industry professionals, planners as well as elected officials.

At the debate, Stintz also took several shots at Tory for his recent SmartTrack transit proposal – establishing a surface rapid transit route to run on existing GO transit train lines – which she said was a fanciful dream.

“We need real plans with real funding,” said Stintz, who has proposed selling off city holdings such as Toronto Hydro to help pay for transit.

Tory refused to take the bait and instead focused his attentions primarily on Chow, with whom he is running neck-and-neck according to recent polls.

Unlike the relief line championed by Chow and others, he said his SmartTrack proposal could be done in seven years and aligned the closest with the province’s own plans for electrifying and expanding GO Transit service in the next 10 years.

“I can’t accept a transit plan that’s 17 years away,” said Tory in reference the relief line which will require at least eight to 10 years – not including time required for environmental approvals, public consultations and design work – and some \$3 billion dollars in as-yet unsecured funding.

Tory also defended his plan to finance a chunk of the \$8-billion SmartTrack proposal using tax increment financing, which would take projected property tax revenue in areas of high development such as Liberty Village and apply to transit.

He insisted there’s enough current and future development to make the plan work. “The city’s growing by more than one hundred thousand people per year to provide that incremental revenue to finance the SmartTrack line,” he said following the debate.

For her part, Chow said the relief line was not her idea alone, and planning for the project was already underway by the city and TTC as well as Metrolinx.

She also accused Tory of waffling on the relief line which she claimed he had championed before unveiling his SmartTrack proposal in May. It was Tory’s top transit priority just three months ago,” said Chow. “He was just saying it a few weeks ago, and now it’s no longer a priority and the wrong line.”

Stintz, Chow and Tory did find common agreement in not reintroducing the \$60 vehicle registration tax (VRT) if elected, a stance Soknacki did not fully refute although he didn’t rule it out entirely either.

“It’s one of the absolute last choices, it’s an incredibly unpopular choice,” said Soknacki of the VRT.

But Soknacki said unlike his competitors he was unafraid to consider the need for higher taxes if necessary to fund construction given the dire congestion seen in the city right now.

“All options should be considered when considering how to best fund transportation needs,” he said.