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Toronto Construction Association blames infrastructure neglect for commute times

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Toronto's commute problem has reached catastrophic proportions say industry stakeholders.

"We're all spending too much time commuting," said Toronto Construction Association president John Mollenhauer, who commutes from downtown Toronto to Richmond Hill each day.

"If there is traffic, you can sit on one of the major arteries and twiddle your thumbs for hours. The severity of the problem in Toronto is enormous and it's not going to be easily fixed."

According to the Statistics Canada report Commuting to Work: Results of the 2010 General Social Survey, in Toronto and Montreal, more than one-quarter of commuters had travel times of 45 minutes or more — much greater than any other metropolitan area. Another one-quarter had travel times of 30 to 44 minutes.

The average Canadian commute, including all modes of transportation, was 26 minutes. Commuters in metropolitan areas with a population of more than one million had an average of 30 minutes.

About 82 per cent of commuters travelled to work by car in 2010, while 12 per cent took public transit.

The problem, said Mollenhauer, is that Toronto infrastructure has been left by the wayside for far too long.

"Much of what we're spending today is catch-up. It's compensating for what we should have been doing decade in and decade out."

On the heels of the StatsCan report came an announcement that the 407 Express Toll Route has opened 13 kilometres of new lanes in each direction between Highway 401 and Trafalgar Road. Construction began in April 2011 and was completed within four months.

But it's not just about fixing existing roads, there is a need for aggressive spending in terms of more roads and more public transit, said Mollenhauer.

Andy Manahan, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario executive director, said funding may need to come from other sources, like High-Occupancy and Express Toll (HOT) lanes.

HOT lanes are express lanes for carpooling drivers and charge a certain amount per kilometre for single drivers.

"I think most people would probably say I don't mind paying an extra \$3, or whatever it is, to drive from Steeles and 404 to downtown to get there faster," he said pointing to the success of the 407 ETR.

A recent study by Ben Dachis of the C.D. Howe Institute, titled Congestive Traffic Failure: The Case for High-Occupancy and Express Toll Lanes in Canadian Cities, stated that HOT lanes have been politically acceptable in the United States, resulting in faster, more predictable driving times.

"Converting carpool lanes to HOT lanes also would: have relatively low implementation costs; potentially increase capacity and travel speed on the highways as a whole; maintain a free option in adjacent lanes for drivers not willing to pay a toll; provide reliable express bus routes; and raise revenues for transportation investments."

Referencing a 2010 thesis by Jeremy Finkleman from the University of Waterloo, the report said 75 per cent of drivers in the GTHA would be willing to pay to avoid traffic congestion during high-urgency trips.

Statistics Canada reported that of the 10.6 million workers who commuted by car, about 9 million said they had never used public transit for their commute. About 7.4 million of these people thought public transit would be somewhat or very inconvenient.

About 1.6 million car commuters said they tried using public transit to get to work and 53 per cent of the considered it inconvenient.

"I think post-election, politicians and others are going to have to show some real leadership and say we can't continue the way we're going, commute times are unbearable," said Manahan. "This region in particular is very important to the economy of the province and if we don't keep people and goods moving, we're going to be in an economically uncompetitive situation."