

How subsidizing trucks to use the 407 could cost Ontario less than building Highway 413

Premier Doug Ford's government is promising new highway across western GTA, but isn't revealing pricetag

[Mike Crawley](#) · CBC News · Posted: Mar 26, 2022



Some advocates are pushing a proposal that would see the provincial government subsidize the tolls for truckers on Highway 407, saying it would be a less costly alternative to building Highway 413.

Calls are growing for Premier Doug Ford's government to reduce traffic congestion by encouraging more drivers to use the 407 ETR toll highway, rather than spending billions of dollars to build the proposed Highway 413.

The 413 would run for 60 kilometres across the northwestern part of the Greater Toronto Area and through the Greenbelt. The proposal has become a

lightning rod for environmental groups who say the highway will contribute to sprawl, and all three opposition parties say they would cancel the plan if Ford's PCs are defeated in the June election.

Opponents of Highway 413 see the 407 as an underused alternative, with great potential to lure traffic from the busiest highway in Canada, the 401.

The advocacy group Transport Action Ontario is floating the idea that the provincial government should in effect make it free for transport trucks to use the 407 by paying the cost of their tolls.

The group argues this would be a cheaper solution for the government than building and operating Highway 413 and would do more to solve the GTA's congestion problems right now.

"Right now, most truckers use the 401 because they find the tolls [on the 407] prohibitive," said Peter Miasek, president of Transport Action Ontario.

"It strikes us [that] the 407 is the perfect alternative because it's uncongested at this time."

Using data from provincial traffic studies and the company that owns 407 ETR, the group estimates such a move would get between 12,000 and 21,000 trucks using the toll highway each weekday.



This is what the Ontario government describes as its preferred route for Highway 413 connecting the northern and western parts of the Greater Toronto Area, between the existing 400 and 401 highways. (Hailley Furkalo/CBC)

It calculates that a full toll subsidy for that many trucks over a 30-year period would add up to the equivalent of \$4 billion in today's dollars.

The Ford government is not saying how much Highway 413 will cost, but an estimate by the previous government several years ago put it at \$6 billion. Independent analysts have pegged the current cost in the range of \$8-to-\$10 billion.

Negotiating such a deal with the company that owns 407 ER would "require a little creativity and some pressure" from the provincial government, says Toby Heaps, the chief executive of Corporate Knights, a business research and media firm based in Toronto.

"There's definitely room for a deal to be done, given that the 407 is relatively empty and there's a lot of big trucks who would love to get on there," said Heaps, one of the entrepreneurs who signed a new open letter to the Ford government [calling for a halt to Highway 413](#).

Others in the corporate world insist that Highway 413 is needed to tackle the growth in traffic in the GTA and they see a toll subsidy on the 407 as an inadequate solution.

"It is not a realistic option," said Nadia Todorova, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario.

With the expected significant increases in population around the GTA, Todorova said capacity must be added to the existing highway network.



The proposal to divert truck traffic away from Highway 401 and onto Highway 407 would involve the provincial government subsidizing truck tolls at a cost of \$260 million per year. (Paul Smith/CBC)

"The 407 alone is not enough to meet that projected demand surge, said Todorova in an interview.

"Even if we were to focus on the 407 in the immediate future, by 2031 we would be right back where we started and suffer from the same sort of congestion problems that we currently have."

While the Ford government is not ruling out measures to get more traffic onto the 407, it is not considering scrapping plans to build Highway 413.

"We can look at temporary measures to alleviate tragic traffic congestion, but we also have to think long term too," said Stan Cho, the associate minister of transportation.

"The 413 has to be built because of a growing population," Cho said in an interview at Queen's Park.

Liberal Leader Steven Del Duca, who was transportation minister when the previous government hit the pause button on the 413, thinks the government should explore a toll subsidy as an alternative to building the new highway.

"I believe every option should be on the table," said Del Duca, "Perhaps that could include looking at ways to encourage more truck traffic or goods traffic onto the 407 ETR."

Tolls on the privately-owned 407 ETR vary depending on the time of day and the particular stretch of highway. Between 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. the per-kilometre price for a typical transport truck ranges from 77 cents to \$1.24.

In 2019, before the pandemic put a significant dent in its traffic, 407 ETR brought in \$1.4 billion in toll revenues, according to its [financial statements](#).