



Highway of the Future

In Section: Infrastructure

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For a decade, studies have concluded that traffic congestion in and surrounding the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is on par with bad traffic in Los Angeles, where motorists have dubbed their highway system "the world's largest parking lot." The Ontario government believes it has a master plan to significantly alleviate motorists' headaches in the GTA, while concurrently boosting public transit options and helping the environment. The GTA West is a proposed highway and transit corridor running through York, Peel and Halton regions, with connections to highways 400, 427, 410, 401 and 407 ETR. Stretching 59 kilometres with proposed four to six lanes – including a separate transitway dedicated exclusively for public transit (for example, buses and light rail transit) – the GTA West corridor would involve 11 interchanges at municipal roads. Electric charging stations, service centres, carpool lots and truck inspection stations are all being explored as part of the design.

Yet, along with any big-scale proposition comes opposition – and there has been plenty. That's why a committee of construction industry stakeholders now have their foot on the gas in promoting the benefits of GTA West, which they have dubbed, "Highway of the Future."

That coalition sees leadership from Nadia Todorova, Executive Director, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO); Patrick McManus, Executive Director, Ontario Sewer & Watermain Construction Association (OSWCA), and Executive Director, Greater Toronto Sewer & Watermain Contractors Association (GTSWC); and Peter Smith, Executive Director, Heavy Construction Association of Toronto (HCAT), and Chair of RCCAO.

McManus said that through early-November, the committee had come together an impressive 80 times over a six-month period. Todorova explained, conversations surrounding the Highway 413 project – which as it stands is anywhere from five to seven years away from construction – began in the mid-2000s. The time is now, she said, to finalize plans and then get shovels in the ground.

"Early in 2021, we started to get a sense of the public opinion on this project," Todorova said. "There was some opposition to the project from municipalities and organizations, which caught us off guard. We had thought that this project enjoyed wide support. That's when we decided to take a look at where the public actually stands on this issue. We asked, is the opposition deep or just really loud?"

NEW CORRIDOR GAME-CHANGER FOR GTA

Extending from Highway 400 between King Road and Kirby Road, to the 401/407 ETR interchange near Mississauga, Milton and Halton Hills, the GTA West corridor is designed to fight congestion, create jobs and prepare for the massive population growth expected over the next three decades. It's part of the Province of Ontario's plan to expand highways and public transit across the Greater Golden Horseshoe – one of the fastest-growing regions in North America.

GTA West would include an adjacent transitway aiming to assist in making public transit an appealing option, in particular amongst residents of underserved municipalities. It's along the lines of other investments including subway expansion plans, GO expansion and the Hurontario LRT, according to the GTA West blueprint.

According to the GTA West corridor plan, a new 400-series highway and transitway would significantly reduce travel times for drivers in York, Peel and Halton regions. It projects that by 2031, more than 300,000 trips would be taken on the highway each day, with a motorist travelling the entire 59-kilometre stretch seeing a 30-minute time savings as opposed to someone travelling Highways 401 and 400.

"There's very little room for growth left in Toronto and Mississauga, while there are tremendous amounts of growth ongoing in Barrie, Innisfil, Bradford, Kitchener-Waterloo and Guelph," explained McManus. "GTA West is really meant to connect those areas with east-west travel. Right now, anyone travelling between Kitchener-Waterloo and Barrie basically has to go into the heart of Toronto. Talk is that we will have more than two million more people moving into this area by 2041. You must have a way to move people, and transit is an option. But it's not the only option, because we live where people love their vehicles."

The GTA West corridor plan also cites statistics that congestion is already costing the GTA \$11 billion each year in lost productivity, which adds to the costs of goods and creates emissions. With the Greater Golden Horseshoe region expected to attract one million new residents every five years moving forward, and a population projection of nearly 15 million by 2051, and with the number of trucks hauling goods in that region expected to double during that time period, the GTA West corridor is self-defined as the best solution for alleviating the oncoming realities of transportation.

According to the GTA West blueprint, the new corridor is expected to generate up to \$350 million in real GDP per year during construction, and is expected to support an average of up to 3,500 jobs each year during that period. More than \$785 million worth of goods per day move on Ontario's highways. Once travelled, the new corridor would help goods travel faster to and through the GTA, and will in turn significantly boost the economy in Ontario and Canada as part of a long-term solution. And it will provide a means of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on the economy. The new corridor would be designed to help attract new businesses to the area, as well as connect people to major employment centres.

"We're now calling it the 'GTA West Transit Corridor' because it's not just a highway," Smith explained. "We'll have a transitway immediately next to the highway. They're not making the mistake of not having it wide enough. It will have room for expansion. But even if we were to snap our fingers and say we're going to build a highway today, that's not going to happen."

FACING OPPOSING VIEWS

Highway 413 isn't without its critics, and neither is Ontario Premier Doug Ford in his advocacy of the project. For example, city councillors in Vaughan voted against the project over environmental concerns. Mississauga and Brampton are also opposed to building the new highway. Even federal Environment Minister Jonathan Wilkinson has weighed in, stating there might be cause for a federal review of the project since, as those opposed to the project believe, it could affect endangered species and increase greenhouse-gas emissions.

After an advisory panel concluded that Highway 413 would save only 30 seconds in travel time, Ontario's Liberal government buried the project in 2018. And an editorial by *The Globe and Mail* in late-October 2021 made the argument (in reference to Google Maps) that a one-way trip along the new highway's route – if Highway 407 were travelled instead – would take about 50 minutes during rush hour. The editorial questioned Ford's claim that Highway 413 would reduce travel time by 20 minutes.

Smith said the Province is about halfway through its environmental assessment on the proposed Highway 413 route. "The Ministry of Transportation has been building across wetlands for a long time, and technology used to minimize the environmental impact continues to improve. The days of just cutting down a virgin forest are long gone. There are best practices – all kinds of environmental remediation.

"We have to assure everyone that the appropriate steps will be taken," he added. "We're keeping up a certain amount of pressure with the federal government because they keep thinking that they're going to step in and perhaps do some sort of environmental assessment which would needlessly slow the process. The Province itself has jurisdiction over its own highways. The Province will do the right thing when it comes to environmental issues."

THERE'S A MOVEMENT AWAY FROM THE INTERNAL COMBUSTION ENGINE, AND WE THINK THAT SOMETIME BETWEEN 2030 AND 2040 WE'RE GOING TO SEE A MOVEMENT GOING AWAY FROM MANUFACTURING THEM ALTOGETHER. WE'LL SEE A SHARP INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF ELECTRIC VEHICLES ON OUR HIGHWAYS. SO THE HIGHWAY WILL BE BUILT AT A TIME WHEN WE'RE SEEING MASSIVE CHANGE.

In addition, Smith said anyone who claims GTA West would save only 30 seconds commuting is wrong in their assumption. "If you take Highway 401 to Highway 400, and then go north to King's Sideroad, or you cut across land on the diagonal, then you know that there is a huge distance savings by going diagonal rather than the square. And of course, people pay money to

take Highway 407 because there's a lot less traffic, and it's faster. Plus, to talk about [Highway 413] creating more capacity and increased gridlock makes no sense."

The committee decided to test the waters with two independent polls: one with Mainstreet Research, another with Campaign Research. Todorova said overall, support in favour of the project is 2:1, with support especially strong among men, and support robust in the 35-49 age group. However, polling showed that all age groups support the project, with support especially strong in the city of Toronto and the GTA.

Poll results are being shared with municipalities, as well as with provincial and federal government officials. Todorova said, "We want to bring a different perspective to this project and present the corridor as something necessary for our future. It's going to address the expected growth, including the increase of goods movement we're going to see – e-commerce space is only going to increase. I think the COVID-19 pandemic engrained the e-commerce space into our psyche to the extent that we want our packages delivered yesterday."

As well and planning for the future, the GTA West could be designed with dedicated areas for electric vehicle charging stations which in turn would encourage more motorists to choose cleaner transportation options. The new corridor could also enable vehicle-to-infrastructure communication – a key element of the next wave of automated vehicles which is already part of a \$1.3-trillion global market.

"We also want to emphasize to decision makers that this corridor is unique in its innovative nature," Todorova said. "It's very innovative with its dedicated space for transit needs – it could be a bus transitway, or it could be converted into an LRT (Light Rail Transit) if the need arises.

"We also need to talk about the future in terms of how Canada has pledged to transition all new cars and light-duty trucks to zero emission by 2035. That really adds a new perspective to the role that highways will play in society: they'll be important facilitators of environmental stewardship," she said.

McManus said the advocacy committee involving industry stakeholders was formed at a time when there was a lot of negative media coverage surrounding the project. He said, "The discussion was very one-sided, information being presented was very skewed, and so we needed to inject more middle ground discussion on this highway.

"We've been working on educating MPs, MPPS and city mayors and councillors on the results of the polls. This transportation corridor is really important because it deals with transit issues, deals with east-west movement of people in an area where we're going to see substantial housing developments over the next 40 years," he said.

McManus explained that much of the same criticism aimed at the proposed GTA West was also hurled at both Highway 401 and Highway 407 during their early planning stages.

"Highway 407 is an interesting case study because it went through very significant levels of opposition before Phase One was built, but then as subsequent phases were constructed there was very strong support both amongst the public and politicians. I think we're in the same boat now. But one of the things we're up against now is we're talking about a theoretical construction of a highway that's probably 10 or 15 years away from the construction process being concluded, as well as all of the housing and commercial developments that would go up in those areas that are currently farmers' fields," McManus said.

"I got my first company car in 1986," added Smith, "and it had a bumper sticker that read, '407 in '87'. It took until 1992 for it to start and it wasn't finished until 2020. Can you imagine what Highway 401 would be like without Highway 407?"

"Robert Bradford wrote *Keep Ontario Moving: The History of Roads and Road Building in Ontario* (2015), and he came across articles in the *Toronto Star* calling for the firing of the Minister of Highways because he spoke about building highways in cow pastures – and that was Highway 401," Smith said.

ACCORDING TO THE GTA WEST CORRIDOR PLAN, A NEW 400-SERIES HIGHWAY AND TRANSITWAY WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE TRAVEL TIMES FOR DRIVERS IN YORK, PEEL AND HALTON REGIONS.

GTA WEST NO NEWCOMER

According to Smith, GTA West is not a sudden knee-jerk reaction, but rather a solution with a long history. "The Liberal government froze the land 15 years ago, but hadn't finalized the routes. So that's one of the problems – they had three separate routes. The farmers who own the land say, 'I'm not going to build on my land, or develop it, or sell it or even do any improvements knowing that next week, you may come along and say, you're being expropriated.' They're saying, 'Let me know if my land is tied up or not. Release me from this freezing.'"

Todorova also speaks to the environmental-related questions surrounding the GTA West corridor, stating that "to everyone's credit, environmental assessments today are much more advanced than when they went through rural land during Highway 401 construction...(and) when they were building Highway 401 and the QEW and other significant highway infrastructure across Ontario, there were always voices that said, 'This highway is not necessary, it's going to be detrimental to everyone. It's not going to save time.' But here we are, decades later: can you imagine life without Highway 401? Can you imagine gridlock if we did not have Highway 407? So I think people sometimes take infrastructure for granted."

In regards to the environment and technology moving forward, McManus said Highway 413 and its inclusion of infrastructure for electric vehicles and innovative public transit make GTA West a smart choice for the future.

"We hear a lot of arguments surrounding emissions, so this highway really needs to be looked at hard," he said. "There's a movement away from the internal combustion engine, and we think that sometime between 2030 and 2040 we're going to see a movement going away from manufacturing them altogether. We'll see a sharp increase in the number of electric vehicles on our highways. So the highway will be built at a time when we're seeing massive change."

Todorova said the RCCAO had commissioned a report, released in mid-November, which showcases the benefits of the Highway 413 corridor in terms of jobs and overall economic impact. She said it also highlights the fact that the corridor will be an economic driver for the province, adding that infrastructure projects like this are going to be key elements in economic recovery as we exit the pandemic.

McManus pointed to another roadblock to getting those shovels in the ground for Highway 413: interference from the Federal government, which he said has "stepped in at a time when the provincial environmental assessment wasn't even completed – by our understanding, it was only about 50 per cent complete. These environmental assessments are really important because they help determine the ideal path and the environmental impact, and also help determine mitigation techniques you could put in place to reduce the impacts."

With so much at stake – for the alleviation of traffic congestion, for the betterment of the environment and public transit, and also for economic recovery – proponents of the GTA West corridor continue to promote Highway 413 as a game-changer for the GTA. They hope that shovels in the ground will no longer be a catchphrase, but rather a reality for Ontario motorists.