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Greater Toronto Region leaders plot economic recovery

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An infrastructure spending watchdog and broader use of streamlined environmental assessments are among the recommendations in an economic recovery plan for the Greater Toronto Region.

“People and businesses need help in times like these,” Hazel McCallion, Mississauga’s mayor and Greater Toronto Region Economic Summit co-chair, said in a statement.

“Often that help is available, but they have to cut through bureaucracy to find it.”

“Choosing Our Future” is a 12-point economic recovery plan created by summit delegates representing Durham, York, Peel and Halton regions and Toronto. The plan’s goal is to generate short-term activity that will drive economic growth in the Greater Toronto Region. Among its aims is removing barriers to infrastructure spending, creating jobs and getting construction projects breaking ground more quickly.

“Though some recommendations may be geared towards other sectors, if we are creating conducive environments for new business opportunities, that is bound to have some spill-over effect benefits for construction,” said Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) and a summit delegate.

A key point in the plan was a recommendation that Ontario’s streamlined six-month environmental assessment process for transit projects “should be extended to other public infrastructure projects consistent with municipal official plans” which conform to Ontario’s Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. Regulatory barriers are “impeding the rapid construction” of infrastructure projects that create jobs, the action plan says.

RCCAO has pushed this broader application of the environmental assessment process and says it would result in tangible benefits for the province and construction.

“Similar to the transit EA, you do not have to look at the alternative to a project — you can look at environmental mitigation with the project you are doing and spend your resources more wisely,” Manahan explained. “This is not about the lessening of environmental oversight — it is about providing some rationalization to the regulatory process.”

The action plan also calls for federal stimulus funds for capital infrastructure investment to be distributed to provinces and municipalities “using the existing (federal) gas tax formula or a formula that achieves comparable objectives.” Using such a process would help improve accountability and efficiency, Manahan said.

“The present system of distributing federal economic stimulus funds on a project-by-project basis is cumbersome,” concludes the summit plan. “It must be accelerated.”

Creation of a private-sector infrastructure spending “watchdog” association was also recommended in the

action plan. This would help monitor the time it takes for announced projects to be completed and ensure that funds are appropriately spent.

The plan also looks at creating an expansion and promotion strategy for the region, striking a Green Industries Task Force and increasing promotion of employment and apprenticeship fairs. To help drive the action plan's various components and create a unified vision for the region, there should be a "war cabinet" including all mayors, regional chairs and municipal economic development officer is a top priority, concludes McCallion.

"This region's economy is bigger than the sum of its parts. Municipal leaders need to acknowledge this reality and work more closely together," she said. "I will be making calls to set a date and an agenda for our first meeting."