

LRT versus subway debate familiar refrain in Toronto's mayoral race

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Toronto's mayoral contenders squared off in a debate over transit, with Olivia Chow digging in on her vow to scrap the proposed Scarborough subway extension – despite the newly re-elected Liberals' campaign promise to fund a subway.

Monday's mayoral debate in downtown Toronto was the first since Kathleen Wynne and her transit-focused platform – which included helping finance a Scarborough subway – won a stunning majority in last week's provincial election.

Despite this, Ms. Chow stuck to her vow on Monday to cancel the three-stop subway extension in Scarborough and instead build seven stops of light-rail transit. Toronto council approved the subway plan last fall. It includes agreements for \$1.48-billion from the province, and \$660-million from the federal government.

“If they pay 100 per cent of it, go for it,” Ms. Chow said of the provincial Liberals' promise. “But I'm not going to put a billion dollars of taxpayer dollars – that's 30 years of property-tax increases that we don't need to have.”

Ms. Chow has argued that building light-rail transit in Scarborough would allow the city to reverse a planned 1.6-per-cent property tax hike, and instead implement a similar increase to help fund a downtown relief subway line and pay for TTC repairs.

But Ms. Chow's rivals – with the exception of David Soknacki, who also favours light-rail transit in Scarborough – immediately accused her of wanting to reopen a matter that has been settled and further delay transit from being built.

“The worst thing we could do is to reopen that debate,” John Tory said, calling it a “rarity in our system for all three levels of government” to agree on something.

Karen Stintz, meanwhile, pointed to the Liberal victory as proof that Toronto residents want the subway debate to be finished. “It is over. It is done,” she said. “We are not going back to revisit that, no matter who the mayor is.”

Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, who has made “subways, subways, subways” his slogan, is at a Muskoka rehab facility for alcohol abuse and did not attend the debate. But his brother and

campaign manager, Councillor Doug Ford, also attacked Ms. Chow's stand. "The subway's going in," he said in an interview after the debate. "The people have spoken loud and clear."

The candidates also spent much of the debate – part of the Transport Futures, Solving Gridlock Forum – attacking Mr. Tory for his promise to fund the city's share of his \$8-billion "Smart Track" transit plan, which involves electrifying existing GO routes, through "tax-increment financing," or tax revenues from future transit-related development.

Ms. Stintz talked about the need to come up with "real money" to pay for transit, "not future money that may come, not future development that may come."

Ms. Chow, meanwhile, drew a comparison between Mr. Tory's funding plan and Mr. Ford's.

"It's not that simple," she said of development charges. "If you have the experience, you need to know that connecting zoning and development with financing is very complicated – which is why Mr. Ford talked about it for four years and wasn't able to produce one penny from it."

The issues of road tolls and reinstating the vehicle registration tax were also raised during the debate as potential revenue sources. All but Mr. Soknacki ruled out both options.

"We need to not be afraid to talk about taxes, user fees and other tools if we want to talk about transit," Mr. Soknacki said.

"We need to fund what our aspirations are. There's no other way around it."