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Toronto's Gardiner needs rehab, assert mayoral candidates

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Toronto's mayoral candidates agree the Gardiner Expressway should not be demolished, instead they want it to be rehabilitated to improve the traffic flow and open the waterfront for future development.

"This is not a controversial issue, we are all in agreement that there is another option that needs to be studied to keep the Gardiner up, while we rebuild and reconfigure it," said Mayoral Candidate Karen Stintz.

"I take great pride that I was the first one out with that idea and my competitors now agree with me."

Stintz made this statement during a debate of four mayoral candidates on June 16, at the Solving Gridlock Forum hosted by Transport Futures in downtown Toronto.

The forum brought together experts from Canada and the United States to discuss the problem of traffic congestion in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, which is an important issue for citizens in the upcoming election on Oct. 27.

The Frederick G. Gardiner Expressway is a key transportation artery, which extends 18 kilometres from the Queen Elizabeth Way at Highway 427 to east of the Don Valley Parkway. The expressway, which is near the end of its design life, is owned and maintained by the City of Toronto.

A report produced by the Public Works and Infrastructure Committee in February recommended to city council that the expressway be removed.

One of the main reasons removal was the preferred option is because it required the lowest public investment of \$240 million. This option has a higher upfront capital cost than maintaining the structure, but significantly lower life cycle costs.

"I think the congestion crisis is so acute that we almost have to adopt a blanket approach of saying we are going to take no steps that are going to in any way increase commute times for people who are hard pressed in that regard," said John Tory.

"Given that all the options that had to do with tearing down the Gardiner provided for some increase, I do not support tearing down the Gardiner."

The Gardiner Expressway generally has three lanes moving traffic in each direction and carries about 200,000 cars per day west of the downtown core, and 120,000 cars per day east of Lower Jarvis Street.

The report estimated that the removal option would increase travel times of some corridor trips by five to 10 minutes longer than the future maintain option by 2031. But, the maintain option would also increase travel times by five minutes over today's condition.

Others agree.

“With one of the longest commute times in North America, I would not be in support of tearing down the Gardiner. I support in principle the proposal that is winding its way through staff at city hall,” said David Soknacki.

“It will not only realign, but has the advantage of taking down part of the access and making the realignment better.”

Toronto council is currently considering a motion to retain the advisory services of Ontario Infrastructure to prepare a procurement options and a tender call for the rehabilitation of the expressway, at a cost not to exceed \$250,000.

“The Gardiner needs immediate maintenance, so concrete doesn’t fall on people,” said candidate Olivia Chow.

“We need to maintain the link between the Gardiner and the Don Valley Parkway. But, we also need to open up the waterfront for development. There is a plan before council, with some details coming in the spring, which is changing the alignment of the Gardner, so it could accomplish both.”

Incidents of falling concrete occurred in the Jarvis Street section of the Gardiner as well as the western segments in 2012. Council authorized a series of interim repairs in 2013 to maintain the area, which delayed full reconstruction of the easterly deck until 2020.

The city’s approved \$662.7 million 13-year budget (2013-2025) for rehabilitation includes reconstruction of the Jarvis east portion. This forms the base case for the maintain option.

“I am looking forward to the expert plan on how that would take place,” said Chow. “That means there will be development in seven or eight years in that area. So, it’s a win/win situation. However, the cost may be substantial.”

According to a report produced for city council in May, the rehabilitation of the Gardiner Expressway, from Highway 427 to the eastern limit, using an accelerated approach, will cost \$1.879 billion over a 25 year period (2014 to 2038).