

November 22, 2010

Ontario transit plans must offer competitive alternative to cars: Study

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Various anticipated Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) transit plans will result in increased construction activity, but funding alone will not ensure them, finds a recent study.

“Clearly, the going assumption that bolsters support for many of these new transit initiatives translates into the belief that ‘if you build it, they will come’,” states Richard Soberman, author of *Delivering Transit Service in the GTHA: Where We Are is Not Where We Want to End Up*.

“But without a parallel emphasis on providing service that is more competitive with automobile travel and more customer-oriented, the main question is whether enough of ‘them’ will come.”

Soberman was commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) to explore how service delivery in terms of customer service, governance, and financing is “equally integral to the future success” of regional transportation plans.

In the GTHA over the next 10 years there are numerous planned transit projects totalling \$16 billion in value. Seventy-four per cent of that funding will come via the Ontario government.

Among these projects: Toronto’s Transit City (for which \$10 billion has been earmarked); York Region’s bus rapid transit plans; the extension of the Spadina subway to York Region; and rebuilding Union Station.

Soberman concludes in his report that investing “a greater amount over the same timeframe is probably impractical from the standpoint of construction industry capacity and effective project management.”

The governance tied to transit plans is the “single most important issue” that affects their decision-making process, subsequent implementation and operating policies.

“The reality is that implementation requires political support, and support often involves political interference,” explained Soberman’s report.

“What appears today to be a well-articulated plan for the foreseeable future will undoubtedly change, if for no other reason than economic times, as well as governments, both change.”

Having legislated commitments which provide guaranteed funding streams over predictable periods will help offset the flux created by a changing political landscape, the report finds.



Andy Manahan, RCCAO

“We keep building incrementally but the issue of governance touches upon the qualifications of board members,” said Andy Manahan, executive director of RCCAO.

“If you have good governance, you will have different levels of government supplying funding easier or letting an agency like Metrolinx be more responsible for funding project plans, instead of having agencies going cap-in-hand to the province every time.”

The current financial landscape governments of all levels face, from maximizing infrastructure dollars to tackling deficits, leads Soberman to conclude that road pricing in some form “is inevitable” to assist funding for regional plans.

Metrolinx projects a 132 per cent increase in GTHA transit ridership over the next 25 years. Increased ridership levels dictate growth in transit infrastructure and that growth demand is dependent on a satisfied customer base.

“If we are not getting that kind of ridership level and we are building new transit infrastructure, will there come a point with those who are funding transit saying this is not as cost-effective as we first thought,” said Manahan.

Putting the customer first “requires a top-down cultural change” that should place customer satisfaction as the key driver of all its activities in all transit agencies, the report concludes.

“The true test of improved customer orientation involves minimizing the disadvantages of transit and maximizing its competitive advantages,” wrote Soberman.