

November 26, 2013

Murray introduces bill to force governments to make 10-year infrastructure plans

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Infrastructure and Transportation Minister **Glen Murray** this morning announced legislation that would commit the government of Ontario to maintaining a 10-year infrastructure plan and updating it regularly. Murray told reporters today that the bill would also commit the government to tally the funding necessary for the plan, and that he hopes to eventually commit the government to longer planning horizons as well.

There's just one thing missing: any planning for the politically sensitive electricity-generation and transmission sector.

Murray tells *QP Briefing* that eventually he hopes that electricity will be brought into the same planning process, but for now he's deferring to existing planning processes in the Ministry of Energy, led by **Bob Chiarelli**.

"We're not at that point yet. Could it apply to energy? Yes. Would I like to? Yes. Is that locked down yet? No," said Murray. He pointed to the community energy planning done in Chiarelli's office as a complementary effort to the government's infrastructure planning.

The Ontario government has, of course, been beset by political difficulties in how it plans electricity infrastructure. Aside from the Oakville and Mississauga gas plants, cancelled at a cost of over \$1 billion, transmission facilities in places such as Clarington have also attracted local opposition¹.

Murray's Progressive Conservative critic **Frank Klees** was dismissive of what he said was the government's too-little, too-late approach to infrastructure planning.

"It's a nothing-bill, frankly," Klees says. "It's supposed to be a 10-year plan, when what we'd like to see is a 10-year plan to balance the budget first and then we can move from there."

"This bill that's being tabled this afternoon has no substance. There are some components that I've been advocating for some time, namely an asset management program, but there are no requirements. This is a lot of vision without substance."

New Democrat Leader **Andrea Horwath** was similarly skeptical of the government's "plan to plan."

"Making an announcement about a 10-year plan that they haven't done a great job on so far isn't the response Ontario is looking for," said Horwath. "It's hard to believe they have any plan whatsoever."

"They have a long-term energy plan they don't pay attention to. So, it's not worth the paper it's printed on."

The government bill, to be titled the infrastructure for jobs and prosperity act, would do more than just consolidate existing government infrastructure plans. The bill would also:

- Obligate the government to consider demographic, economic, climate and fiscal trends;
- Support partnerships between government and industry to help develop new technologies;
- Prioritize projects that align with existing provincial plans, such as the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe or the Big Move;
- Promote design excellence, involving architects and others on provincially owned projects, and;
- Prefer contractors that employ or engage apprentices for provincial projects.

Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, was enthusiastic about the day's announcement but did highlight some potential problems with the apprenticeship element of the bill.

"There could be a few difficulties, because not all trades are under the apprenticeship legislation. This gets into the College of Trades, which I know is controversial for some groups," Manahan says.

"If we can ensure there's things like local weighting, if we can attract youth into the construction industry, that's a good thing. What remains to be seen is how we get there," added Manahan.

Thursday morning's announcement took place at Evergreen Brick Works, within sight (from the roof) of the Prince Edward Viaduct, the bridge across the Don Valley that was overseen by Toronto's almost-sainted public works commissioner **R.C. Harris** in the early 20th century. Murray invoked Harris's foresight in designing the bridge with a rail deck, combining road and mass transit in a way that modern planners are trying to re-learn.

"Fifty years before we had a rapid-transit system, the plans were drafted for that project," Murray noted. The story is an imperfect guide for infrastructure building today, however — Harris incorporated a rail deck into his 1913 bridge design because Toronto had already begun the debate over where a subway should be built², and Harris assumed that the tight-fisted voters of the city couldn't keep rejecting the higher taxes the project would require forever. The city did not agree to build a subway until after his death in 1945.

Undaunted, Murray says that the province needs to look not just at costs, but at the value infrastructure can add to the tax base.

"The Bloor Viaduct dramatically increased Toronto's tax base and opened up development potential in what was, at the time, a really thoughtful debate. They didn't just look at the cost of the viaduct, they looked at the return on investment," said Murray.

References

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