



## Infrastructure Ontario head sees ‘challenges’ in getting major transit projects done on time



By Ben Spurr Transportation Reporter  
Mon., Dec. 2, 2019

The provincial government could be facing an uphill battle to get its \$28.5-billion GTA transit plan built on schedule, for the simple reason that contractors may not be able to handle the workload.

During a panel discussion at the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships’ annual conference in Toronto on Nov. 19, Infrastructure Ontario president Ehren Cory was asked whether the industry had the capacity to build the transit projects as planned.

“How confident are we that the staging will allow the market to adjust to the capacity required? I would say: medium,” he told the industry audience at the session entitled “Delivering Ontario’s \$28.5-Billion Transit Plan.”

Cory said the provincial government was staging construction in a way that will let private firms decide which projects they want to pursue and make long-term plans.

“All of that’s good. I think where, when we look down the pipe, where it becomes more problematic, is when you layer on not just our program, which is big in itself, not just the transit program we’re doing together ... There are some significant health-care projects also coming in the same timeframe, then there’s nuclear refurbishment going on in our market. And then there’s the private-sector activity, which you only have to look around Toronto to see,” he said, referring to the city’s ongoing development boom.

“So I say ‘medium’ because I think our staging does a very effective job in helping lay out the runway for our projects ... But we only control a part of that, and when we look at how hot the market is, we do have concerns, certainly.

“Regardless of our staging, when you add up all that’s going on in the market, we see real challenges ... in the early ’20s, in the next few years,” he added.

In response to the Star’s questions Friday, a spokesperson for IO said Cory “wanted to provide additional context to some of his remarks” at the conference, and issued a statement from the president.

“I am confident that the construction industry will be able to complete the provincial transit projects within ambitious, but achievable, timelines,” Cory’s statement said.

**Andy Manahan, executive director of the [Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario](#), said worker shortages reported by the labour and management construction groups his organization represents appear to back up the assessment that the industry is approaching capacity.**

**“We’re hearing certainly from our members, anecdotally, it’s difficult to find workers,” Manahan said in an interview. He blamed the problem on “the volume of work that’s coming down the pipe.”**

Premier Doug Ford [unveiled the Ontario PC government’s Toronto-area transit plan in April](#). Its centrepiece is the Ontario Line, a 15.5-kilometre rail line that would connect the Ontario Science Centre to Exhibition GO station, and which the government has estimated will cost \$11 billion and be complete by 2027.

The other three projects in the plan are:

- the \$5.5-billion, three-stop Scarborough subway extension to McCowan Rd. and Sheppard Ave., scheduled to be complete by 2029 or 2030;
- the \$5.6-billion Yonge North subway extension to Highway 7 in Richmond Hill, also scheduled for 2029 or 2030;
- the \$4.7-billion Eglinton West LRT extension to Renforth Dr., scheduled for 2030 or 2031.

Given the scheduled opening dates, much of the work on all four projects would have to be done concurrently. Experts [have cast doubt on the government's schedule for the Ontario Line in particular](#), warning it's unlikely the province can get such a complex project built in just eight years.

Phil Verster, the president and CEO of Metrolinx, the provincial transit agency responsible for the GTHA, said in early November his organization would do everything it can to stick to government's timelines. However, he noted that there's expected to be a "massive increase in infrastructure investment across the world" over the next ten years, and private firms bidding on the new Ontario transit projects would determine how quickly they can be built.

"Bidders come back to tell us what time frame they can deliver it in. So ... the overall schedule stays influenceable by what we get back from the market," he told reporters after a Nov. 4 press conference.

Barbara Mottram, a spokesperson for Ontario Transportation Minister Caroline Mulroney, declined to answer questions Friday about the timing of the government's transit plans. She referred the Star to IO.

The statement Cory sent Friday said his comments at the conference "referred to the findings of our labour market capacity study" which indicated "there may be shortages in some key trades around 2023 if the appropriate actions are not taken."