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TRAFFIC CRISIS FEARED; Improvements may avert L.A.-level gridlock: report

TORONTO - Greater Toronto's traffic congestion will rival current gridlock problems in Los Angeles by 2031 unless there are significant transit service improvements and increased use of high-occupancy lanes on highways, a report done for the province warns.

The warnings are contained in a consultant's report prepared this year by the IBI Group and released this week after a request by the National Post.

The report, Transportation Trends and Outlooks for the GTA (Greater Toronto Area and Hamilton), noted that the GTA had the fourth highest "travel rate index" in North America, based on a comparison of 2001 data.

The travel rate index measures the amount of additional time required to make a trip because of traffic congestion. The 2001 rate for the GTA was 1.32, which means a trip took 32% longer than if it was made at "free flow" speeds. The rate may climb to 1.40 by 2031 in the GTA, just below the current score of 1.53 in greater Los Angeles, the report states.

The total congestion cost per peak traveller, which includes fuel costs and lost productivity, is projected to rise to \$1,279 in 2031, which would put the GTA just behind L.A. when comparing current data in North America.

Some of the report's findings and warnings were highlighted by the chair of the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority (GTTA) in a recent speech to the Toronto Board of Trade.

"It is getting worse, not better," Rob MacIsaac told the business crowd. "We are on a trajectory that will see us vying to be in the top two most congested cities in North America, sharing that dubious honour with the city of Los Angeles," Mr. MacIsaac said.

The GTTA was created by the province last fall to come up with a long-term transportation plan for the region.

The IBI Group report points out a number of challenges that the GTTA will face as it tries to reduce the level of traffic congestion.

The population of the GTA and Hamilton is expected to increase by nearly 50% by 2031, from 5.8 million to 8.6 million people. Nearly 80% of that growth will be in GTA municipalities other than Toronto and Hamilton.

The number of trips in the peak morning period is projected to increase by more than 50% to 3.46 million over the next two decades, with transit continuing to account for just under 20% of the total. The proportion of trips made on transit has decreased from 25% in 1986 to the current level of 18%.

The report called for new and improved cross-regional transit, as well as the creation of more high-occupancy vehicle lanes on the 400-series highways.

Despite the many challenges outlined in the report and in other studies about GTA traffic congestion, Mr. MacIsaac was upbeat about the future.

"Just because we are congested doesn't mean that we can't ensure people have mobility," he said.

Mr. MacIsaac welcomed the promise of \$17.5-billion in transit funding announced this month by Premier Dalton McGuinty, to build 900 kilometres of new and improved transit lines in the GTA and Hamilton.

"I think it's an awesome start for us," said the GTTA chairman, who played down whether or not the funding was announced because of the upcoming provincial election this fall.

"I just don't see any profit from examining the motivation for good public policy. The money is there and I'm very grateful about that and I intend to use it for the public good."

He added, "We need to identify key intersects between modes of transportation, and ensure they are operating seamlessly. In Europe, they have taken a very thoughtful approach to connecting walking, biking, public transit and automobile use to each other using something called mobility hubs. It's something our plan needs to address."

One of the busiest existing transportation hubs, Union Station in downtown Toronto, was described as a "bottleneck" by Mr. MacIsaac. "It needs some work. It is not a very comfortable place to be," he said.

A sharp increase in cycling and even walking to work and school should also be part of any plan to reduce traffic congestion, he said. "Things like bike lanes and bike lockers at GO stations could make a huge difference. And they don't cost a fortune."

Mr. MacIsaac noted that cities such as Munich have bike lanes that are segregated from automobile traffic.

One of Mr. MacIsaac's biggest challenges will be to decide which projects receive the highest priority, said Richard Soberman, a professor emeritus in the civil engineering department at the University of Toronto.

Mr. Soberman, who was the lead author of a fall, 2006, report about GTA transportation challenges commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, was critical of the fact the GTTA board is made up of local politicians.

"I think when you have a board comprised of politicians, the priorities will be for the constituencies they represent," he said.

The key to success for the GTA "is the concept of supporting a plan rather than individual projects," Mr. Soberman said. The priority should be on transit expansion that has a regional impact, rather than a project wholly within a municipality, he said.

The board of the GTTA met last weekend and Mr. MacIsaac indicated he hopes to consult as widely as possible before any major decisions are made, beginning in early 2008.

TOP 10 TRAFFIC SPOTS IN NORTH AMERICA

1. Los Angeles
2. San Francisco
3. Chicago, Greater Toronto Area
4. Washington, D.C.
5. Houston
6. Atlanta
7. Miami
8. Boston
9. Phoenix
10. Dallas-Fort Worth