

Province eyes Metrolinx shakeup

By **ANTONELLA ARTUSO**, QUEEN'S PARK BUREAU CHIEF

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A key piece of Premier Dalton McGuinty's plan to stimulate Ontario's auto-ravaged and recession-battered economy is to build government infrastructure.

Public transportation is the big winner and though Metrolinx, a relatively new provincial agency, some \$50 billion will be spent over the next 25 years on a staggering list of 52 rapid transit projects across the GTA.

It is an historic undertaking, on a scope not seen in this province since the Centennial construction spree of the federal government in the mid-1960s, and there are already signs of trouble.

Metrolinx was intended to be a champion to confront the horrendous gridlock that for decades has paralyzed Toronto, the GTA and Hamilton areas.

Traffic is not only choking the work-home commute for workers, it's strangling trade and economic development in the region.

Estimates suggest traffic will increase four-fold over the next quarter of a century and that the cost of congestion will increase to as much as \$28 million a day.

But instead of a dragon slayer, there is growing concern that the Metrolinx board, dominated by municipal politicians, is enabling red tape, funding disputes, resident opposition and parochial decision-making.

Those who have expressed concern with the "consensus" governance model include its chair and, sources tell Sun Media, Premier Dalton McGuinty.

FAST-TRACK

McGuinty, counting on the provincial agency to fast-track the \$11.5 billion he's set aside to spend on transit, is being urged to take the politics out of the Metrolinx board.

Municipal board members, including Toronto Mayor David Miller, may be replaced with government and private sector experts with backgrounds in finance, construction and project management.

That decision could be made as soon as this spring while the province looks at other major transit changes, including the merger of Metrolinx and GO Transit.

In addition to Miller, Mississauga's Mayor Hazel McCallion and TTC chairman Adam Giambrone and city councillor Norm Kelly are among the local politicians who may be turfed from Metrolinx.

Roger Anderson, Chair of Durham Region; Halton's chairman Gary Carr; Fred Eisenberger, the mayor of Hamilton and Bill Fisch, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Regional Municipality of York Region are other local politicians on the Metrolinx board.

The eight municipal politicians hold the balance of power on the 11-member board.

One of the influential groups lobbying for a change in governance structure at Metrolinx is the Toronto Board of Trade.

President and CEO Carol Wilding said the board structure needs to evolve following the release last fall of its \$50 billion regional transportation plan, The Big Move.

Similar transit planning groups in other jurisdictions have developed implementation boards that rely heavily, and in some cases totally, on private experts with the necessary background to carry through with major infrastructure projects, she said.

"We've been advocating heavily that you really need to leverage private sector experience," Wilding said. "It is critical that that governance body has to be one whose priorities are really focused beyond election cycles and any changes in political agendas."

Metrolinx Chair Rob Maclsaac said he believes the politician-dominated board worked well in developing its regional plan, which calls for the addition of 1,200 km of new rapid transit lines, but he too sees a need to speed up the process.

"I would love for things to be moving faster than they are but the tools that I've been given are basically consensus-based and so that's the model that I'm working with," Maclsaac said. "That sometimes takes longer than you might like."

Asked if the nature of the Metrolinx board has to change to implement this plan, and if the competing transportation priorities of different jurisdictions might slow down implementation of the Big Move, Maclsaac said that is a question for Premier McGuinty.

"I think it's a good question and I don't know the answer," he said. "There are huge challenges that remain for Metrolinx, challenges associated with the tools in our tool box, challenges associated with trying to get all of these different interests working together and so I'm not underestimating those."

PREEM 'WANTS ACTION'

"But what's clear to me from the premier is that he wants action and I think that's a message that all of the transit operations across the region should be cognizant of."

Political appointees to Metrolinx that spoke to Sun Media -- McCallion, Giambrone and Carr -- all believe the board is working cooperatively and competently.

Carr said it's taken time to build up staff at Metrolinx -- "it was poor old Rob MacIssaac in a room with one little chair" -- but worries about parochial interests trumping good transit planning haven't materialized.

"Even the members who are on from Toronto have been very good about thinking about the region, not just thinking about their own TTC," Carr said. "But having said that, that's a major part of it because obviously it's in the centre of everything. Certainly a lot of the board members realize that this won't work without the co-operation of the TTC because it is a main part of it."

McCallion said the hold up is not municipal politicians, but federal funding red tape and process that binds up major projects so tightly they never get going.

"If you were in business and you used the process that we use in government, you'd be out of business overnight," she said.

"There's no way that anything can move based on the present process."

Municipalities have told the federal government repeatedly that it needs to flow money directly to them, rather than doling it out on a project-by-project basis, if it really intends to use infrastructure to stimulate the sagging economy.

"They didn't change the process," McCallion said. "The recession could be over before the shovels get into the ground."

"Shovel ready" projects is the trendy buzzword being tossed around by all levels of government promising new infrastructure spending.

But it certainly hasn't been soil that's been shovelled over the last few decades as politicians posed for repeated media photo opportunities to announce projects that never made it into the station.

The poster child for tied up transit just might be the Spadina subway extension -- first announced in Ontario Finance Minister Dwight Duncan's 2006 budget and the first TTC subway proposed to extend outside Toronto.

The project would allow Toronto and York Region to extend the subway to the Vaughan Corporate Centre at Hwy. 7.

Double environmental assessments, lengthy waits for funding approvals, red tape, and political wrangling left the project on paper for two years, although politicians say now it's finally barreling ahead.

Toronto has also just approved the extension of the Yonge subway line north into York Region.

TTC Chairman Giambrone, also a member of the Metrolinx board, said that project is an example of how the members of the agency have been able to work through any disagreements.

"To be honest with you, the TTC would not have built the subway north into York region but York Region has been very supportive of the Transit City lines, so you work with your partners," he said.

Transit City is Toronto's plan to build seven new light rail transit lines across the city -- a venture that has been included in Metrolinx's Big Move regional plan despite concerns that subways were the better way to go.

Giambrone said municipal politicians with extensive transit experience, and not unelected board members, are in the best position to complete the vision of a regional transit system.

"Citizens don't control or oversee municipalities," he said.

But Toronto Councillor Michael Walker doesn't believe that Toronto councillors on the board are playing nice.

Council's so-called support of the York Region subway came with enough non-negotiable caveats that it effectively is the same as a rejection, he said.

"I refer to that as the poison pill resolution," Walker said, describing Toronto's demand for funding to overhaul the Bloor-Yonge subway station and TTC control of the entire project.

Metrolinx is forever looking over its shoulder at its creator, the provincial government, while getting outflanked by the TTC which tries to scuttle their proposals, he said.

"Metrolinx is really the weak sister ... because it doesn't have the political connection with Queen's Park," he said. "And Queen's Park has got a split personality because they don't want to offend ... Miller and the NDP in Toronto."

Effective planning for a mass transit system from Hamilton to Peterborough cannot go forward with the current structure of Metrolinx, an organization that has become paralyzed, he said.

"The core of a mass transit system is going to ride through Toronto," Walker said. "You've got to do subways ... Miller has rejected them. Metrolinx is going to have to get control at least of the TTC's mass transit portion, and that's the subways, and then go from there."

METROLINX TOP 15 TRANSIT PRIORITIES

BIG MOVE: Transforming transportation in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, the final Regional Transportation Plan and Investment

Strategy released by Metrolinx, identifies more than 50 transit projects, 15 of which are identified for earliest implementation:

- Express Rail on the Lakeshore Line from Hamilton to Oshawa
- Rapid transit in downtown Hamilton from McMaster University to Eastgate Mall
- Rapid transit on Dundas St. in Halton and Peel
- 403 Transitway from Mississauga City Centre to the Renforth Gateway
- Hurontario rapid transit from Port Credit to downtown Brampton
- Brampton's Queen Street AcceleRide
- Rail link between Union Station and Pearson Airport
- VIVA Hwy. 7 and Yonge St. projects in York Region
- Spadina subway extension to Vaughan Corporate Centre
- Yonge subway capacity improvements and extension to Richmond Hill
- Eglinton rapid transit from Pearson Airport to Scarborough Town Centre
- Finch/Sheppard rapid transit from Pearson Airport to Scarborough Town Centre and Meadowvale
- Upgrade and extension of the Scarborough Rapid Transit (SRT) line
- Rapid transit service along Highway 2 in Durham
- Improvements to existing GO Rail services and extension of GO Rail service to Bowmanville

ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK

Premiere Dalton McGuinty is tired of the red tape surrounding Metrolinx's Big Move project and promises to take action.

DAVID MILLER

Mayor, City of Toronto: Miller is an employment and immigration lawyer who entered city politics in 1994 by winning a seat on the old Metro Council in 1994. He became a councillor in the new City of Toronto and was elected Mayor in 2006.

HAZEL McCALLION

Mayor, City of Mississauga: McCallion is a political icon and the GTA's longest serving mayor. She has been in municipal politics since 1967, is a former President of the Association of Municipalities of Ontario and is a Member of the Order of Canada.

ADAM GIABRONE

Toronto City Councillor and Chair, TTC: Giabrone represents Ward 18, Davenport. He heads the city's transit commission, is the youngest member of council and a former National President of the federal NDP.

GARY CARR

Halton Regional Chair: Is a former Conservative MP for Halton and MPP for Oakville and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Carr was also a pro hockey goalie drafted by the Boston Bruins.

ROGER ANDERSON

Chair, Durham Region: Anderson is a long-time Durham politician and past president of the Association of Municipalities (AMO). He's also served as chair of the region's transit commission and as a director on the GO Transit board.

NORM KELLY

Councillor, City of Toronto: Kelly is councillor for Scarborough Agincourt and a member of several city committees, including Executive Committee. He is a former MP in Pierre Trudeau's government and real estate businessman and Metro councillor.

BILL FISCH

Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Regional Municipality of York Region: Fisch is a former Markham councilor, a law grad, chairs the region's rapid transit public-private partnership steering committee and past GO Transit board member.

FRED EISENBERGER

Mayor, City of Hamilton: Eisenberger was elected to Hamilton council 1991 and following an unsuccessful bid in 2000, won the mayor's job in 2006. He headed up Hamilton's port authority and efforts to redevelop the port area.