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Ontario PCs revive plans for GTA West highway amid questions of suitability in changing transportation future

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Critics warn that disregarding the **effect of induced demand** in pursuit of expanded roads, such as the proposed GTA West highway that would link up to Highway 401, can lead to increased tailpipe emissions, more people trapped in slow commutes, greater sprawl and the loss of land that might otherwise be protected or used for other purposes.

The GTA West has been called the last crucial missing link in Toronto-area highways, and at the same time dismissed as a relic of an outdated approach to transportation infrastructure.

The idea of a roughly 50-kilometre stretch of major new highway to the west of Toronto has been kicked around for many years. The former provincial Liberal government suspended and eventually killed the planning process. Once the Progressive Conservatives took over, though, they were quick to bring the environmental assessment back to life.

The [route](#) currently being studied for the proposed Highway 413 – often referred to as GTA West – was released in September and a series of public meetings wrapped up last month. It would link Highway 401 with the 410 and 400.

“We’re trying to bring relief to drivers across the province,” Transportation Minister Caroline Mulroney said in an interview last month, adding the GTA West is meant “to address congestion in the area and to provide needed transportation infrastructure.”

There is currently neither a price nor timeline for the GTA West, although it can be expected to cost billions and take years to build. And even some supporters wonder whether it’s the right idea for a changing transportation future.

The 401 is the busiest highway in the country, and establishing a new link to other highways could speed up travel through this area, at least initially.

But while the province’s figures show significant travel time reductions if this highway is built and others widened, the modelling doesn’t account for the likelihood these changes would provoke more driving. Building any highway is by nature an expensive bet on a particular future. But it can also act to help create that future, by giving people more reason to drive.

“Congestion doesn’t get fixed by building highways,” said Geoff Kettel, president of the Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods, which represents a number of residents’ associations across Ontario. “It’s not good planning. It’s continuing the sprawl and not trying to build a more compact community.”

#### MIXED FEELINGS

In June, Brampton West MPP Amarjot Sandhu brought a motion to the Ontario Legislature, asking that the GTA West planning process be restarted. This had been in the Tory platform and, with a majority government, the motion passed easily.

This project seems an obvious bread-and-butter issue for a Progressive Conservative Party that has worked to position itself publicly as a close friend to drivers.

“The population is increasing rapidly ... and we definitely need [this] highway to reduce the congestion,” said Mr. Sandhu, who says his constituents are clamouring for the project. He dismissed the idea that a new highway would simply attract more drivers.

In Brampton, Councillor Michael Palleschi says, the project is very popular with his constituents, who are sick of traffic. In June, that city’s council backed his motion supporting the process, but he concedes he has mixed feelings.

“Am I a believer that we need another 400-series highway in the west end [of the Greater Toronto Area]? I don’t know,” Mr. Palleschi said, noting that he’s a father with young children who wants to see a future with more transit, cycling and walking, one in which people have less need to drive.

He acknowledged, though, that this future could be some time off, and that freight shipment through the area needs to improve. While the province is increasing GO commuter rail service across the region, more trains do not appear to be coming quickly to Brampton. So maybe another highway, while not ideal, is needed.

“If we’re just going to sit on our hands and not do anything, and wait for the future to dictate what we’re going to do, we’re going to be reactive,” the councillor said.

“Let’s actually get out and do something. Let’s say that these lanes are going to be for autonomous vehicles, these lanes are going to have strictly goods movement. Let’s be progressive and not sit back and wait.”

That uncertain future was one reason the Liberals turned away from the highway in the first place. Back in 2015, then-transportation minister Steven Del Duca pointed to the rapid changes in transportation, including the increasing sophistication of driverless vehicles, as reason to suspend the environmental assessment.

“The world of transportation I think is actually at the sort of front edge of a disruptive transformational period,” he said in an interview at the time. “The reason that we paused is just take one step back,

pause, collect our breath, take a look at it and make sure that as we go forward with all of our transportation planning that we get it right.”

## **INDUCED DEMAND**

One big uncertainty is how this road would affect traffic patterns.

In a landmark 2011 study, Gilles Duranton and Matthew Turner, both then at the University of Toronto, found a one-to-one relationship between increases in road capacity and in the total number of kilometres being driven.

The phenomenon is called induced demand: A bigger road offers more supply and thus makes driving more attractive, which encourages people get behind the wheel. Traffic does not get better. More people get where they're going, but not any faster, often leading to calls to expand again.

Although decades of evidence from around the world show this, it is often disregarded. Ms. Mulroney, who became Transportation Minister in June, said in last month's interview she had yet to be briefed on the concept.

“Induced demand is the great intellectual black hole in city planning, the one professional certainty that everyone thoughtful seems to acknowledge, yet almost no one is willing to act upon,” urbanist Jeff Speck writes in his book *Walkable City*.

According to the Ministry of Transportation of Ontario (MTO), traffic modelling for the GTA West did not take induced demand into account.

A 2013 consultant report done for the MTO showed that each variant of the GTA West being considered – combined with widening sections of Highways 400, 401, 407, 410 and 417 – would result in a roughly 20-per-cent decrease in travel times between a number of spots deemed urban growth centres. But this figure does not consider the possibility the new road capacity would attract people not currently driving, which the MTO says would be too difficult to project.

“Quantifying ‘induced demand’ (or the new trip generation) requires assumptions on elasticity which [are] typically not built into these modelling frameworks,” spokesman Bob Nichols wrote in an e-mailed statement. “It is recognized that the literature on travel demand forecasting and practice contains an extensive debate on ‘induced demand.’”

Critics warn that disregarding the effect of induced demand in pursuit of expanded roads can lead to increased tailpipe emissions, more people trapped in slow commutes, greater sprawl and the loss of land that might otherwise be protected or used for other purposes.

When the GTA West environmental assessment was relaunched this year, Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette said in a letter to Ms. Mulroney that his community has long had to set aside a huge swath of land on which the highway might eventually be built.

In an interview, he called it “a huge concern” for the city’s tax base that land which might be used for industrial purposes has been effectively locked in limbo for years.

“Close to 1,200 acres have been protected for eight years,” he said. “It’s land that the town would want to have as employment lands.”

Mr. Bonnette said that the environmental assessment, if it is going to be done, should be completed expeditiously. But he questioned the need to restart it at all.

He noted that his community recently declared a climate emergency and is desperately in need of transit. And more than once in an interview he paraphrased a famous Lewis Mumford quote that expanding roads to beat congestion is like loosening your belt to fight obesity.

“If they’re going to continue to build highways, they’re going to have to look at another highway as soon as this one’s done,” he said.