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Highways to climate chaos

by LAURA CAMPBELL

What is the height of climate denial? Building more highways instead of railways to move people and goods. Obviously not a single Conservative MPP truly believes that climate change is an existential threat. Indeed, for our very own Sylvia Jones, climate change might be real on paper, but in practice, it is not a concern. Climate action is an inconvenience to her and every other local and provincial politician who wants to pave over farmland, cut the Greenbelt in half, and funnel some quick cash into the pockets of the construction industry.

Have you read about Highway 413, also known as the GTA West Corridor? It was abandoned by the governing Liberals in 2018. They shelved the project because after a decade of research, an expert panel concluded that the highway was not necessary and the environmental impacts were too intense. The proposed route of this highway runs from Kleinburg, across South Caledon, all the way West to Milton. In other words, the highway will serve primarily the trucking industry. This is despite the fact that subsidizing a dedicated trucking lane on the 407 could accomplish a very similar thing, at a fraction of the cost.

Even still, the fact remains that if more folks had access to transit, then trucks could get back on the existing publicly-owned highways with less congestion. Everyone knows that building more highway infrastructure doesn't actually ease traffic. Case in point: how are all my Toronto-commuter friends loving that extra lane on the 427 these days? Oh right. It didn't shave a single minute from your commute.

Look, I have sympathy for the many economic problems COVID-19 has presented to our provincial government. However, the response should never be to fast-track environmental assessments, which is how they are planning to get shovels in the ground as soon as possible. What Doug Ford is doing is undermining the assessment process in such a major way that many concerned citizens have no real recourse to challenge decisions that are being made. There are new Municipal Zoning Orders every month. These override local decision making.

Ironically, in the case of highway 413, one local council in particular, is keen to see this go forward. Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson is a huge proponent of the highway, and the last time I saw him (in 2018) he spoke of the project as though it was still a possibility. That's because he probably knew that if the Conservatives won a majority, they'd make it happen. Doug Ford said so on camera when he told a group of developers that he'd open up the Greenbelt for them. And here he is, delivering on that promise. The highway will pave over 2000 acres of class 1 and 2 farmland and cross 53 water points. But we need streams and wetlands for flood mitigation. We need clean rivers for drinking water. We need clean air. We need clean skies. All of these things are compromised by the highway alone, not to mention the urban sprawl that will follow in decades to come.

The highway will likely cost us around $6 billion of public money. I have no problem with governments spending money if they're making a good investment. Infrastructure of course, has historically been a golden ticket out of depressed economies. But highways don't create jobs in any long-term sense. The opposite is true if we invest in transit. Building transit has the same economic benefits during the construction phase and would require an even wider variety of industries to come on board. But especially where it concerns major investments in railways, those projects will generate employment well into the future whether in administration, train maintenance, or operation.

The City of Brampton has already opposed the highway, as have a few other municipalities. Brampton is moving towards a different planning model that considers walkability as a key feature of any new development in the City. The reality is that more folks can and want to work from home, but those that still commute likely dream of the day when they can hop on a train to get to where they're going. Research has shown that commuters spend on average around 7 years of their life in a car. But train travel allows for workers to do more with their day. Across the world, people read, sleep, knit, draw, listen to podcasts, watch sports, or meditate on trains as they travel to work. Here in the GTA people prepare for harrowing winter commutes with coffee and gripped hands on steering wheels.

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Our planet is quite literally burning. Solutions to our crisis abound. Political will to make change does not. But tackling climate change can achieve so many other important things- especially stimulate a sluggish economy. When was the last time you felt excited and inspired by something our provincial government did? I want to see a bold transit plan to meet the needs of a growing population. I want to see affordable housing. And I want to see planning that reflects the terrifying reality of life on a warming planet. More of the same just won't cut it. Innovation and bold solutions are what we need now.