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Not so fast, province warns Ford on killing transit plan

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Transit City isn't dead just because rookie Mayor Rob Ford has decreed it so, warns Ontario Transportation Minister Kathleen Wynne.

The \$8.15 billion Toronto light rail plan has already left the station because work has started, said the minister.

"Obviously I would be very concerned if there's money wasted and time wasted, and I think a decision to scrap the whole plan now would risk that kind of waste," said Wynne.

Ford announced Wednesday he has ordered the TTC to abandon the provincially funded suburban light rail plan and put together a new plan by January for underground light rail and subways.

"The mayor campaigned on a different direction — he has stated he wants to move in that direction and now he needs to work with this council to come up with a plan for moving forward," said Wynne.

"We will have that conversation with him, but any plan that comes from the city has to come from the full council and the transit commission," she said.

Wynne refused to say that the provincial funding would be cancelled if Transit City stalls.

"It's our obligation as a level of government that has worked with them to make sure that we continue that collaborative relationship," she said.

Behind the scenes, senior Liberal insiders are fuming that "between \$140 million and \$150 million" in broken-contract fees and "up to five years" of transit progress could be lost.

Noting how long it has taken to get the Spadina subway extension to York University underway, one official predicted none of Ford's tunnel dreams would be fulfilled in a four-year term in office.

"It takes years to get environmental assessments, assemble land, and other pre-construction work done," said the high-level source, pointing out that tunnelling along major thoroughfares would disrupt traffic for even longer than the construction of LRT lines.

But if Ford's first challenge is garnering council support, funding subways will be a bigger hurdle, said organizers of a conference on road tolls in Toronto Thursday.

“Rob Ford has to face reality, that these systems can’t be paid for out of general taxes so you have to look at new funding models,” said Andy Manahan, executive director of the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario, a coalition of construction industry management and labour groups.

“He should be working with all the other mayors across the region to ... come up with a good plan to pay for all the infrastructure within the Metrolinx plan. If that ends up being subways, well, road pricing becomes even more important,” said Martin Collier, of Healthy Transport Consulting.

Meantime, City Councillor Shelley Carroll, who visited the Sheppard Ave. Transit City construction site near the Agincourt GO station, noted that it was the only line that got federal funding — \$330 million — in part “because we were starting from a place where there is no war on the car.”

Twelve kilometres of the 13-km light rail line planned for Sheppard would continue to accommodate four full lanes of car traffic.

Ford might have been hasty, said Carroll. His plan might be called something other than Transit City, but he could learn that many aspects of the Metrolinx plan make sense.

Meantime, the community liaison office on Sheppard will remain open as construction continues. The work near the GO station is necessary whatever happens on Sheppard, TTC chief general manager Gary Webster has said.

But a regular meeting between the Business Improvement Area and the construction team has been postponed indefinitely.

NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo (Parkdale-High Park) said the Liberal government must stop Ford from derailing the LRT scheme.

“Toronto families have been waiting patiently for improved public transit so that the morning commute to work and school doesn’t take so long and so they can get home in the evening to enjoy dinner together,” said DiNovo.

“Fifteen years ago, these families saw the previous provincial (Progressive Conservative) government kill Eglinton transit,” she said.

“Hundreds of Thunder Bay workers (at Bombardier) and their families are being left to twist in the wind, wondering if they’ll have work.”

But scrapping light rapid transit lines in favour of more subways could create more jobs. Patrick Gossage, a public relations consultant who represented Bombardier Inc. in the earlier stages of the Transit City plan, told the Star’s Tracey Tyler that when it comes to physical components, subway cars have more Canadian content than light rail vehicles.

“There are far more jobs in subways,” Gossage said last night.