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RCCAO Study Examines Politicized Process of Transportation Planning in the GTA, Offers Priorities for Action and Recommendations for Funding

TORONTO (January 29, 2008) – Transportation planning for the Greater Toronto Area is being driven more by political considerations than needs or cost effectiveness. In an effort to address this issue, a new study being released today puts forward priorities for action.

Commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO), the study notes that “both *Toronto Transit City* and *MoveOntario 2020* are examples of top-down planning where elected officials dictate what their professional advisors will implement, a reversal of the usual approach.”

Transportation Opportunities in the Greater Toronto Area, written by transportation expert Dr. Richard Soberman, points out that the transportation routes and technologies selected by the City and Queen’s Park have yet to be subject to any comprehensive analyses.

The provincial plan, with its 52 proposed projects, “is essentially an amalgam of politically driven wish lists.” The Toronto plan relies entirely on light rail transit (LRT) to the exclusion of other technologies – an approach that will be seen as an undesirable intrusion leading to considerable opposition in some communities.

Both the Ontario and Toronto plans expect to accommodate future travel demand entirely through expansion of public transportation. Yet experience shows this may be an unrealistic assumption – from 1986 to 2006, the total population in the GTA and Hamilton grew by about 45 per cent while transit use increased only 13 per cent.

Dr. Soberman identifies the projects that have the greatest potential to reduce transit travel time, a fundamental consideration if the goal is to increase transit ridership and reduce dependence on private automobiles. His priorities are:

- A continuous LRT service between eastern Scarborough and the Downsview subway station along the Sheppard Avenue corridor.

- A continuous transit route linking Scarborough and Mississauga within the Eglinton Avenue corridor.
- A transit network that integrates the Brampton Acceleride project, the Hurontario corridor, and the Mississauga Transitway.
- Extension of the Yonge subway north to Langstaff, including modifications to a number of existing stations and a new system of train control to increase system capacity.
- Protection of a right-of-way in the Finch Hydro corridor for potential long-term use as a busway for both public and privately operated buses.
- Relocation of the existing bus terminal to permit better access to Union Station.
- Improved transit access to Pearson International Airport from Union Station. A final decision on the airport project is awaiting completion of an environmental assessment, the terms of reference for which have sat idly with the Ontario government for over 15 months.

The study also makes recommendations with respect to funding, labour productivity, road tolls, gas tax transfers and vehicle taxes.

Dr. Soberman characterizes the current approach to funding transit as “ask and pray” whereby municipalities have to make requests for more dollars from the provincial and federal governments and then “hope for the best.” Transit financing should be legislated, he argues, so that there is long-term predictability. Legislation would provide guaranteed streams of revenue allowing public agencies to self-finance more effectively and also issue conventional debt.

Improvements in labour productivity also afford opportunities for reducing costs. Since the nature of transit demand is highly peaked during the morning and afternoon ‘rush’ hours, there should be greater use of part-time labour. Moreover, as LRT services are introduced, there is the potential for more flexible work rules involving multiple unit trains. The study acknowledges, however, that these “are very contentious matters, politically, and from the standpoint of labour-management strife.”

Road tolls should be considered as a means of financing GTA transportation needs. Similar to last week’s report by Harry Kitchen that recommended road tolls on existing 400-series and other highways around the GTA, Dr. Soberman’s study also favours an eventual move to region-wide road pricing. *Transportation Opportunities* warns that tolling expressways only in Toronto, without applying them uniformly and equitably across the entire GTA, could lead to some employers relocating beyond the central city.

With respect to other possible revenue streams for transportation infrastructure investment, Dr. Soberman estimates that a gas tax transfer of 2 cents per litre from each of the province

and the federal government, supplemented by a GTA wide annual vehicle tax of \$60, would translate into about \$6 billion.

Andy Manahan, Executive Director of RCCAO, said the independent study “is an effort to inform transportation planning in the GTA by challenging certain assumptions and offering a fresh perspective.”

Metrolinx, established by the province to plan a GTA-wide transportation system, is currently holding public consultations as it moves forward in developing its initial proposal by June 20. RCCAO hopes that this and other recent transportation studies it has commissioned contribute to the process by stirring discussion and debate.

The RCCAO is an alliance composed of management and labour groups in the construction industry. Its goal is to work in cooperation with governments and related stakeholders to offer realistic solutions to a variety of infrastructure challenges. RCCAO is making these investments in top-notch research studies so that this region builds a better transportation system that is vital for our future economic prosperity.

Dr. Richard Soberman is the former Chair of Civil Engineering at the University of Toronto, an Associate of Trimap Communications Inc. and a Director of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority. His last report for the RCCAO was *Transportation Challenges in the Greater Toronto Area*, released in November, 2006.

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