

Guilbeault's road infrastructure comment spurs RCCAO, ORBA survey on where Ontarians stand

Angela Gismondi March 21, 2024

With every action comes a reaction.

In response to federal Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault's recent comments that the government should stop investing in new road infrastructure, the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) and the Ontario Road Builders' Association (ORBA) commissioned a public opinion poll and the survey says a majority of Ontarians support the construction and expansion of new road infrastructure.

"We know that already the highway network across Ontario is near or at capacity and then couple that with the population growth that we are experiencing and are projected to experience, it was just a very concerning comment. We want to get a sense of what do Ontarians feel about this statement," said RCCAO executive director Nadia Todorova.

On Feb. 12 Guilbeault said the existing road infrastructure "is perfectly adequate to respond to the needs we have."

After the media reported on it, Guilbeault received backlash and spent the following week walking back his comments, saying he should have been more specific. In an article published in the Daily Commercial News, construction stakeholders said backtracking his comments was not good enough.

The poll was conducted from Feb. 28 to March 1 and consisted of 1,959 respondents. The results, Todorova said, reveal Ontarians strongly support building critical road infrastructure across the province, despite the statement from Guilbeault.

It found two to one disagreed with Guilbeault's statement.

"You have Minister (of Housing Sean) Fraser going out and making all these housing announcements and really focusing on housing, but then you have a minister in the same cabinet saying that there should be no new road infrastructure being built. In order to build housing you need that enabling infrastructure. You need the roads. You need the sewers. You need the wastewater treatment. I think there just needs to be a little more consistency in the messaging."

Another objective for conducting the poll was to gauge support for Highway 413, the Bradford Bypass and Ring of Fire.

RCCAO did polling in 2021 which showed strong support for these projects.

According to Todorova, the most recent results show that after years of debate, the people of Ontario still recognize their importance as a key component of transportation planning for the region.

“I really want to emphasize the consistency of the results from the polling that RCCAO did in 2021 and the polling that we’ve done in the last few weeks,” Todorova explained. “There is no ambiguity in the responses. They want all levels of government to invest in new and existing road infrastructure to alleviate congestion and open up more economic opportunities.

“They see the challenges that the current road infrastructure presents to them and they want that to be addressed,” she added.

The poll results also showed:

- Two to one of respondents support Highway 413
- Two to one of respondents support the Bradford Bypass
- Four to one of respondents support the Ring of Fire development project
- Two to one of respondents believe “the government needs to build or expand more roads and highways” (where they live)
- Two to one of respondents believe “the government needs to build or expand more roads and highways” (across the province).

“Today’s results show everyday people understand the critical need for these generational transportation infrastructure projects,” said Walid Abou-Hamde, CEO of ORBA, in a statement. “The roadbuilding industry also employs more than 56,000 men and women in Ontario, that is tens of thousands of good paying jobs supporting workers and their families across the province.”

The groups are hoping to use the poll for advocacy purposes.

“Obviously Highway 413 has been impacted by the federal government considering doing a full environmental assessment,” Todorova pointed out. “The Supreme Court has been quite clear in the fall of last year that the Impact Assessment Act is largely unconstitutional. We really want to show decision-makers the support for new road infrastructure across Ontario, the fact that it has been consistent over the last three years and then more specifically with the federal government...showing them that they should give the 413 back to provincial jurisdiction and should align their priorities and their messaging.”

— *With files from Don Wall*