

Industry skeptical about new Ontario high-speed rail proposal

by Richard Gilbert Dec 19, 2014

Ontario construction leaders are both optimistic and skeptical about the provincial government's decision to undertake an environmental assessment (EA) for a proposed high-speed rail line that will connect Windsor, London, Kitchener-Waterloo and Toronto.



"For any kind of a transit project or high-speed rail in this case, you have to have an environmental assessment process," said Andy Manahan, executive director of the **Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario**.

"So, by initiating the process it shows the province is serious about looking at the feasibility of doing high-speed rail in the southern interior where most of the population is right now. It's a good step."

The Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO) announced on Dec. 5 that the EA process has started for the construction of a high-speed rail line in the southern interior of the province.

There is very little information available about the project at this early stage in the process. But, it seems as though the government's decision to move forward with the EA was triggered by a commitment to build new public transportation and invest in transportation infrastructure.

"The traditional manufacturing base in Ontario is changing. The innovation and knowledge economy is growing in significance and there is a need to position Ontario's transportation infrastructure to support this," said MTO spokesperson Bob Nichols.

"Ontario is taking the next step to build a high speed rail line that will connect Windsor, London, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Toronto's Lester B. Pearson airport, which will improve travel options, reduce travel times and create jobs by getting people moving."

According to Nichols, the first step in the EA process will be to evaluate high-speed rail technologies, routing, station options and develop a service plan.

Despite agreement about the need for transportation in southern Ontario, some construction leaders are very skeptical of the government's announcement.

"I will believe it when I see it. I don't believe it will happen," said David Baxter, executive director of the London and District Construction Association.

"When the Wynne government made the announcement during the election, most people in this area that I talked to shared the same opinion — 'ya right.' It's just another election announcement that is going nowhere."

Premier Kathleen Wynne's government promised to build a high-speed rail link between London, Kitchener and Toronto before the Liberal party won the provincial election on June 12, 2014.

In particular, Glen Murray, who was transportation minister at the time, said the project would cost between \$2 to 3 billion and take a decade to complete.

"When I heard they were going ahead with the environmental assessment, I thought maybe there is some hope for his thing," said Baxter.

"And, then I heard the preliminary investigation done by a UK company was a kind of cock-up. It was done in two weeks. So once again it sounded like it was completely done timing wise for the election."

The CBC released information obtained from of a freedom of information request on Dec 10, which revealed the pre-feasibility studies for the proposed project was produced by a London-based consulting firm called First Class Partnerships.

According to the partially redacted documents, one of the reports was completed in two weeks and done at a much higher cost, because it normally would have taken three to four months.

In addition, one of the reports would have normally required the consultant to walk or drive the entire route. However, due to the rush the consultant relied, in part, on Google Earth.

First Class Partnerships submitted an invoice to the Ontario government for \$115,000 in May for work on the high speed rail report and a report about an expanded GO Regional Express Rail service.

Baxter said the preliminary study is a waste of taxpayer's money, because it was not done properly.

The circumstances surrounding the proposed project have made Baxter extremely skeptical. But, he is a supporter of rail transportation and he thinks it would be fantastic if the project actually happened.

"I know I am sounding like a doom and gloomer on this thing," Baxter said.

"Part of me would really like it to happen, but I am sort of protecting my disappointment, by not getting too on board with this thing. It certainly would be a wonderful thing for this part of the country and the construction industry."

Nichols said the provincial government will begin to consultations in 2015 with First Nations and a wide variety of groups, including municipalities and businesses.

The EA will follow the Transit Project Assessment Process (TPAP), which is a streamlined process that is designed to expedite the development of transit projects.

The TPAP process does not have a formal requirement to develop a terms of reference like an individual EA.

The study will identify and assess environmental impacts, evaluate connections with other transportation facilities/services and develop ridership and revenue forecasts.

It is estimated that the EA process including approvals will be completed within four to six years.