

January 31, 2013

Opinion / Editorials

Keep up pressure to fight transit gridlock: Editorial.

Incoming Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne is open to tolls to ease gridlock. Good. When Metrolinx releases its recommendations, she can make them real.



TARA WALTON / TORONTO STAR

Incoming Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne at Queen's Park Jan. 29.

As with a heavily laden freight train that's finally up to speed, momentum has — at last — kicked in on finding new ways to fund public transit. It's still a long way to the station and there's plenty of worn-out ideological baggage to toss out. But all signs point to a serious new willingness to choose between tolls, taxes, parking fees and a variety of other "revenue tools" to pay for transit expansion.

It's about time. Gridlock is already choking the local economy, depriving the Greater Toronto Area of an estimated \$6 billion each year. That will only get worse as people and cars grow in number and spend ever more time just inching to where they need to go.

There is a solution: Metrolinx, the province's regional transportation authority, has developed [a \\$50-billion plan, called the "Big Move,"](#) a \$50-billion plan, called the "Big Move," to keep traffic and public transit flowing. But the province has funded only a fraction of that and can't pay for rest. That's where the need for new revenue tools comes in.

Naysayers — stand up and take a bow, Toronto Mayor Rob Ford — have been adamant in opposing any new toll or tax for transit projects. But such measures are attracting more and more support from smart-minded politicians who realize there's no free ride when it comes to easing gridlock.

The latest, and most impressive in her commitment, is incoming Ontario premier Kathleen Wynne. [She has indicated she's prepared to push ahead and expend some political capital to get the Big Move rolling.](#) "This is the moment that we have to step forward," Wynne said in an interview with the Star this week.

She won't be stepping alone. Other leaders, including Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion, have endorsed special charges dedicated to easing congestion. Her preferred option is a new tax. Urban activists, transit advocates (including this newspaper), unions, academics and many business people have all lined up in favour of new fees.

The Greater Toronto Civic Action Alliance, in particular, has been [effective with its "What would you do with 32?" campaign.](#) effective with its "What would you do with 32?" campaign. It asks people how they would use an extra 32 minutes — the estimated time that the Big Move would shave off an average daily commute. Thousands have responded, with answers ranging from spending more time with family to learning a new language.

The City of Toronto, to its credit, is also rousing the public to this issue through a new consultation on future transit funding. Called ["Feeling Congested? Toronto Talks Transportation,"](#) "Feeling Congested? Toronto Talks Transportation," it's being headed by the city's chief planner, Jennifer Keesmaat. Public meetings start next week, along with a substantial on-line effort, asking Torontonians to choose how they'd pay to ease congestion from a menu of proposed revenue tools.

The private sector has advanced the debate, too, with the [Residential & Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario releasing a thoughtful study](#) **Residential & Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario** releasing a thoughtful study on Tuesday urging road tolls, among other measures. It also highlighted the potential benefits of switching to zone-based transit fares instead of the Toronto Transit Commission's current go-anywhere-for-one-price system.

The locomotive driving all this welcome discussion is a looming deadline confronting Metrolinx. It has until June 1 to put forward a comprehensive "investment strategy" indicating just how the Big Move would best be funded. It's hard to imagine any meaningful approach that doesn't include tolls. Once that plan is at hand it will need to be backed by Wynne, enlightened municipal leaders, and everyone else wanting bold action against gridlock. Right now, they have momentum. Let's hope they don't lose it.