

GTA West highway decision could determine future of the region

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Metroland Media Group

As the spring deadline looms for a decision on whether to kick-start or put the brakes on the controversial GTA West highway, pressure is mounting on the province from opposing groups.

After two years of environmental assessments and public consultations to identify a preferred route for the four-to six-lane highway linking Vaughan and Milton, dubbed the 413, the province suddenly suspended work on the project in December, saying it was essential to have a forward looking plan when it comes to relieving congestion.

The Ministry of Transportation promised an update on the project in the spring.

Environmentalists and communities that will be bisected by the 413 welcomed the decision to take a pause, hoping the next move would set the stage for a more transit-focused future. But Peel and York regions, bolstered by the development industry, are pushing to resume the project, saying growth can't be supported without a highway to get people and goods from here to there.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out cars and trucks will never be obsolete, said John Sprovieri, a regional councillor in Brampton, which is on the highway route. We have to build for that, he said.

At the heart of it, the high-

way decision pits two models for regional planning smart growth vs. urban sprawl against each other. Some say it will even create the blueprint for how the province wants cities to grow decades from now. No one seems to know which way the decision is likely to go.

The GTA West Highway is a symptom of a larger problem in how we plan for future growth in this region, said Sony Rai, of the group Sustainable Vaughan, which has been speaking out against the route that will cut through northern Vaughan. Municipalities such as Vaughan and Brampton want highways because they're still planning car-dependent suburbs, he said.

Any investment in public transit the province makes to reduce traffic congestion in the GTA is undone, year after year, as 905 municipalities continue approving car-dependent growth, he said.

As the deadline nears, both sides are trying to demonstrate how much is at stake.

Susan Swail, the smart growth program manager with the group Environmental Defence, says the highway will cut through protected Greenbelt lands in Vaughan and pave over prime farmland in Caledon.

We are hopeful the suspension was time to do further study and look at the climate change impacts of this highway: What's the cost of it, and how much more congestion

will it create? Swail said.

More than 1,000 people have signed a petition to Stop the 413.ca, she said, and lawn signs with Stop 413 are popping up in King, Vaughan, Caledon and Brampton. We are hoping they cancel the project altogether, she said.

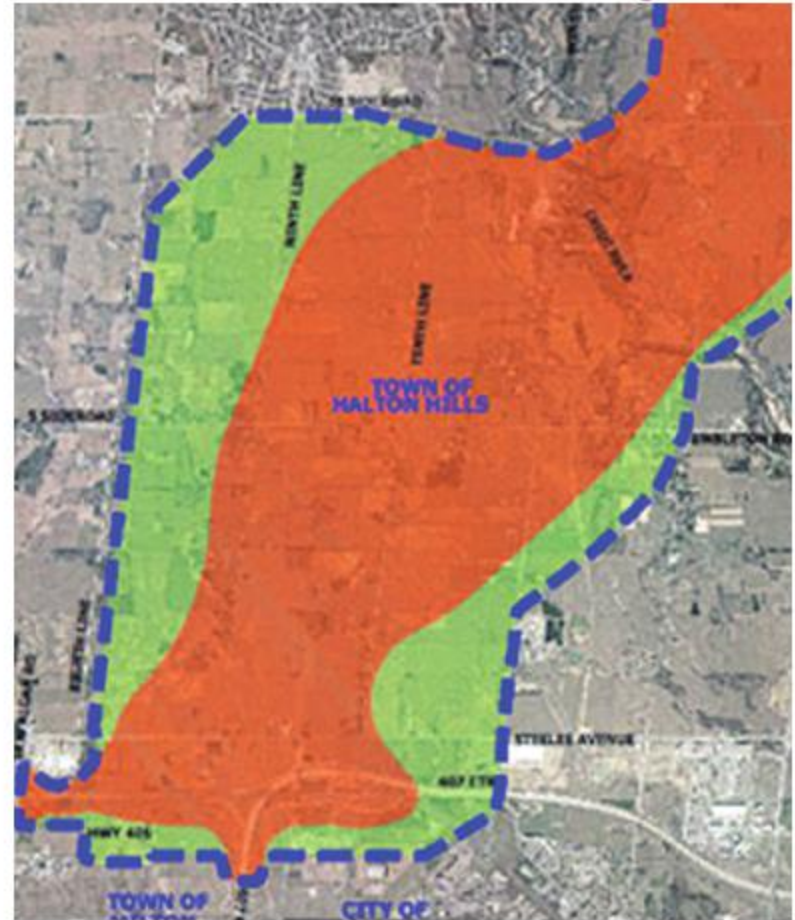
Both York and Peel say they need the highway to plan for the future. In recent months, both councils have sent the province strongly worded motions asking the ministry to resume the environmental assessment process and choose a preferred route as soon as possible.

Vaughan, Caledon and King City are endorsing similar motions.

Peel Region officials asked for a face-to-face meeting with the minister to discuss the highway, and one has been scheduled with the three Peel mayors and chair Frank Dale for Monday, the minister's office confirmed.

We agree with the provincial interest; they want high-order transit and more people to change their behaviours, said Dan Labrecque, Peel's commissioner of public works. But one of the big challenges in the GTA is the movement of goods, and where do the trucks go, he said. We see the corridor as a long-term strategic infrastructure investment to protect the economy of the GTA.

There is development pressure, too. The multiple proposed routes for the highway have frozen lands along the



The Ministry of Transportation promised an update on the GTA West project in the spring. With no word yet on whether or not the project will go forward, some city officials have scheduled a meeting with Minister of Transportation Steven Del Duca. *File Photo*

various paths that cannot be developed until a decision is made. A letter sent to the regions by BILD, which represents developer interests, says its members support plans to move forward with the GTA West Corridor EA Study.

But King City Mayor Steve Pellegrini, who sits on the York Region council, says continuing with the study will actually protect the region from ram-

part development. We want the province to finish the study and preserve the corridor in perpetuity, said Pellegrini, who doesn't expect the highway to be built for decades. If they do not, they will release the land and it will all be developed, he said. And if there is ever a need for an east-west corridor, there will be nowhere to go, because there will be homes there.

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