

# Move over motorists — it won't be the more the merrier when it comes to traffic congestion

*A transportation crisis is hitting southern Ontario and experts say it could have a dramatic affect on the GTA's economic prosperity*

By **KIM ARNOTT**

Special to The Champion

Think Halton's traffic congestion is bad today? Well, prepare to yield while 650 new cars merge onto the highways in October alone.

Another 650 are expected to join you in November, and in every other month from now until the year 2016.

In fact, the transportation crisis in southern Ontario is so bad that we're going to have to start spending twice as much money as we do today, just to keep the roads at their current levels of congestion.

The situation truly is a crisis, and one that, if not addressed over the next few years, will have a dramatic impact on the economic prosperity of the GTA, according to staff with the Region of Halton.

The depressing statistics were outlined at a breakfast meeting recently hosted by the Oakville and Burlington Chambers of Commerce.

Halton's population is expected to grow by about 200,000 people between now and 2016. All those new residents will mean that the number of cars on the regional road system will increase from about 201,000 to 324,000.

#### Little planning has been done, says McCleary

Despite that, there is little in the way of planning, funding or political will aimed at dealing with the increasing traffic congestion, said David McCleary, senior policy advisor with Halton Region.

"This is positioned to be the major urban problem at the turn of the century," he said. "If we don't act, we're going to have a congestion crisis that gets out of control."

While traffic backlog has a substantial impact on the quality of life for commuters, who find their work days lengthened by hours, it also adds to air pollution problems, creates difficulty for emergency vehicles responding to calls and encourages drivers to seek out rural and suburban roads as alternate routes.

But perhaps the most significant impact is that the gridlock damages the area's economic well-being, said Kate Johnston, director of the regional business development department.

And since the GTA and Hamilton-Wentworth areas are the economic engines of both the province and the country, it's time for federal and provincial governments to wake up and provide their share of funding to solving the transportation crisis, she added.

#### New roads not the only answer

About 50 per cent of the gross provincial product and output is generated in the GTA and Hamilton-Wentworth regions, while the two areas account for about 21 per cent of the gross national product.

"It's clear that the factors that hinder economic development in the GTA have a provincial and national effect too," said Ms Johnston.

"If our centres cannot move people and goods and services on that highway, than the economic engine of this province is running on three cylinders, not eight," added Oakville Mayor Ann Mulvale.

Speakers at the breakfast meeting emphasized that new roads aren't the only solution to the transportation crisis.

Public transit, commuter parking lots and high occupancy vehicle lanes also have a role to play in ensuring traffic moves smoothly throughout the area.

But while over 70 per cent of Halton residents commuting to downtown Toronto use GO Transit, commuters to many other areas of the GTA have no access to public transit.

#### Savoline calls on the province

Halton regional Chair Joyce Savoline echoed the call to get other levels of government involved in providing funding for transportation infrastructure.

She urged the Chambers of Commerce to lobby political representatives for more funding, and said the Halton regional council would like to see the provincial government invest a portion of transportation-related revenues collected in the area back into the transportation system.

In 1997-98, the provincial and federal governments collected about \$1.95 billion in gas taxes and vehicle and driver fees in the GTA and Hamilton-Wentworth areas, said Ms Savoline.

None of the federal monies, and only 20 per cent of provincial revenues collected were reinvested in the transportation infra-

structure in the area.

Ms Savoline suggested that an investment of 80 per cent of the revenue collected would solve the area's transportation crisis.

Strangely enough, despite sitting in hours of gridlocked traffic, local residents don't realize the extent of the crisis, Mr. McCleary told the audience of about 50 people.

"They, in fact, think someone has a plan and someone's solving the issue," he said.

#### Trucking company concerned

Randy Eccles, a representative from a Burlington trucking firm, admitted he was concerned by the information presented at the meeting, as well as the apparent lack of a cohesive plan for solving the crisis.

As a national accounts manager with Specialty Freight Consultants, he said the traffic congestion is impacting on the number of trips that the company's fleet of trucks can schedule, and therefore, on the profitability of the company.

"Our drivers say it's constantly getting worse," he said.

## What motorists and taxpayers face

- Halton residents currently make 750,000 car trips per day, or 6.4 car trips per household. That number is expected to increase to 1.2 million total trips by the year 2016.
- Without GO Train service, the QEW would need to be widened by three lanes in each direction to handle additional traffic.
- About 80 per cent of all truck movements occurring in Ontario each day either originate or pass through the GTA or Hamilton-Wentworth regions.
- A 1986 University of Toronto study estimated that road congestion adds \$3 billion per year to the cost of goods movement in the GTA. Estimates suggest that number could be as high as \$9 billion today.
- Transportation infrastructure needs will cost between \$700 and \$900 million in Halton over the next 20 years.
- In 1985, the QEW was congested for three of the 12 business hours each day. In 1998, the highway was congested for 10 of the 12 hours. (Statistics weren't available for Hwy. 401.

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