

Stouffville Tribune

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EDITORIAL

Federal support of road improvements welcome

York Region chairperson Bill Fisch is not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

If GTA Minister David Collette wants to help solve the area's gridlock problems, Fisch will take all the help he can get.

Collette has been promoting a plan for the federal government to help large urban areas solve their traffic backups.

Although the scheme is short on details right now, Collette describes something similar to the much ballyhooed infrastructure program, in which the federal, provincial and municipal governments split the cost of capital projects three ways.

For Fisch and Richmond Hill Mayor Bill Bell, this inspires visions of more funding for public transit, maybe even making some unused CN lines available for more commuter trains.

Certainly, the infrequent GO train trips on the Richmond Hill and Newmarket lines contribute to the clogged highways through York Region during rush hour.

Collette correctly points out that cars idling in traffic foul the environment and the inability to move goods affects trade - both of which are federal responsibilities. So it is the federal government's responsibility to help.

But it should be remembered that the federal government played a role in creating the problem, too.

Local roads and transit departments can't handle the volume of commuters because municipalities can't afford to maintain them. This is, at least in part, a product of cuts to provincial transfer payments, which are, in turn, a product of reduced federal transfer payments.

In 1996, for example, every York Region municipality was hit with 35 to 39 per cent cuts in their transfer payments. In 1997, local municipalities were hit with an average 30 per cent cut in transfers although the actual losses absorbed by towns ranged from 17 per cent in Vaughan to 38 per cent in Georgina.

What this means is that the higher levels of government have been fighting their deficits by withholding money they used to give municipalities to use as they see fit. Then, at least in Ontario, they have downloaded new responsibilities to the local councils.

Can MPs be surprised, then, when they are faced with crisis situations in towns across the country?

In response, they target money to what they consider to be a priority.

But this has removed a measure of control from the local governments, the politicians who are closest to the people.

If the other levels of government decide York Region's desire for more commuter trains is misplaced, would they refuse that plan in favour of more neighbourhood busing, for example? Could they arbitrarily decide that road widenings or highway extensions shouldn't be funded by the plan, thereby all but ensuring these things aren't done?

This certainly wasn't a problem under the infrastructure program, in which the federal government helped pay for just about anything the local government wanted.

Drivers throughout the GTA will welcome federal support for any plan that will help keep the traffic moving.

But perhaps it shouldn't take a special project to bring about co-operation between all three levels of government. Perhaps if they worked together as a matter of routine, they wouldn't need special problem-solving initiatives.

OPINION



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tories should not be surprised by Bill 160 ruling

MPP Julia Munro's "surprise" at Justice Peter Cumming's ruling that the Bill 160 funding formula "has been implemented with haste and without sufficient analysis as to what the arrangement will mean for the quality of education in the province" is a surprise itself.

In your July 25 article, Munro said that Cumming's conclusion "doesn't reflect the concerns of the public, the taxpayers and the experts."

Presumably she is referring to experts other than those appointed to the government's own Who Does What panel, who recommended leaving school boards with a bit of room to levy taxes, five per cent of their overall budgets, to meet community needs.

This expert advice, however, was dismissed by Premier Mike Harris and his inner circle who insisted on rendering school boards virtually toothless, perhaps paving the way for their ultimate abolition. Chalk up one for big, centralized government at the expense of local democracy.

As for presuming to speak for the "public" and "taxpayers," Munro might cast her mind back to last October, when, at the height of public concern over Bill 160, Tory support fell to a record low of 36 per cent.

One can only hope that York Region high school students will not, again, have to face uncertainty, instability and tension as they prepare to return to

classes this fall. And if they do, Munro should not be surprised.

H. LEZNOFF

Internet is as fast as its weakest link

Shaw, Rogers, Cogeco and the other cable companies involved would have the consumer believe that Wave and @Home services will provide a very fast internet connection, and for the most part that is true.

However, my parents taught me that if a deal appears too good to be true it may well be, and I believe this is the case with cable modems. While they provide a fair service to solve the dilemma of slow speed connections, cable modems will not improve the overall speed of the internet.

If your favourite webpage has a slow server, it will continue to be slow with a cable modem. The internet is as slow as its weakest link. Even if the server on your favourite web page is fast and your cable modem is fast, you will still run slow if the connections between the server and your internet provider are slow or busy due to traffic.

It's like buying a shiny new sports car and having to drive at the speed limit. While you can drive as fast as you want in your driveway, you can only drive the limit on the (information super) highway. Your July 25 story should have noted the limitations with cable modems, as well as the benefits.

PAUL MORRISON



Doug Devine

Restore right of school boards to tax locally

Last week's ruling against Bill 160 was as easy to predict as it is to fix.

By taking control of the education purse strings, not only did the Tory government know it was taking control of school boards, it knew it was the first step toward its goal: eliminating boards entirely. It is little surprise Mr. Justice Peter Cumming saw through the charade and ruled the province violated the constitutional right of Catholics to control their schools.

Now comes a whole new legal challenge for the Tories, especially if the courts reject their request to have the judgment stayed, pending their appeal. If they are forced to immediately restore the right of Catholics to collect school taxes, it opens the door to all other boards and teacher unions to challenge the Tory plan under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms - since that document outlawed discrimination based on religious grounds.

And even though the Supreme Court has ruled against similar challenges from Jewish and other religious-based school boards, that ruling was based on the fact everyone has access to the public school board and thus weren't being discriminated against.

But if the Catholic boards now have rights the public boards don't, Ontario will be discriminating against all non-Catholics.

The solution is simple - restore the right of boards to collect some funding from property taxes. Although that would destroy the Tories' plan, it would appeal to the public's desire for some local control over schools. After all, it never made sense to have one-size-fits-all funding, since each area has its own financial needs and challenges. The best way to address those differences is to have local trustees, elected by local voters, decide if and when extra money is needed.

To those who still buy the Tory argument spending was soaring under local control, take a look at your new property tax bill. It appears most of those bills will be higher, despite the fact the province took over half the education costs. The main reason, aside from market value assessment, is the Tories are forcing York Region to send \$93 million to Toronto to help pay social costs. Given the choice of sending 15 per cent of your taxes to Toronto, or using it for local schools, I doubt many residents would choose the former.

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