

Federal report favours Hwy. 407 extension

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

People concerned about Hwy. 407's planned eastern extension have one more month to tell the federal government why. But though the latest delay has disappointed the toll highway's private owners and left local politicians angry at the government, conclusions drawn by the federal fisheries department report released this week should cheer supporters of the Markham-to-Pickering toll road.

After investigating the 16-kilometre extension's impact on fish habitat and the environment, the department found that

measures promised by the 407 consortium should compensate for any damage.

"It is the DFO's position that the (extension) proposal will not have any long-term adverse environmental impacts to areas within DFO mandate or responsibility," said the report, released on the Internet Wednesday.

The release was coupled with a decision by Fisheries Minister Herb Dhaliwal to grant the 30-day comment period on the four-lane (and ultimately 10-lane) toll road, which would run from Hwy. 48 in Markham to Brock Road in Pickering.

After March 10, Dhaliwal could either approve the construction or refer the matter to a mediation process or to a panel review.

Both York Region Chairperson Bill Fisch and Durham Region Chair Roger Anderson said the comment period is a waste of time.

"And I hope on the 31st day they say fine, put the shovel in the ground," said Anderson, arguing the extension represents "hundreds and hundreds of jobs, millions and millions of dollars" for the regions.

Fisch said he will push hard for the project's immediate approval. "We need to get that construction going as soon as possible."

The DFO's study held up construction for months. Anderson acknowledged the possibility that the road could go the way of Hamilton-Wentworth's proposed Red Hill Creek Expressway, which, on the strength of a DFO report and public concerns, was held for a panel review. Hamilton-Wentworth has refused to participate and is taking the matter to court.

The Durham chairperson said he holds Sheila Copps, a Hamilton MP responsible for the referral. A few area Liberal MPs have expressed concerns to the DFO about the 407 extension.

"If we have to go through what Sheila Copps is doing to Hamilton, I'm going to be really upset," Anderson said.

On Thursday, 407 spokesperson Betty Fevreau said the consortium of companies has to wait out the additional month.

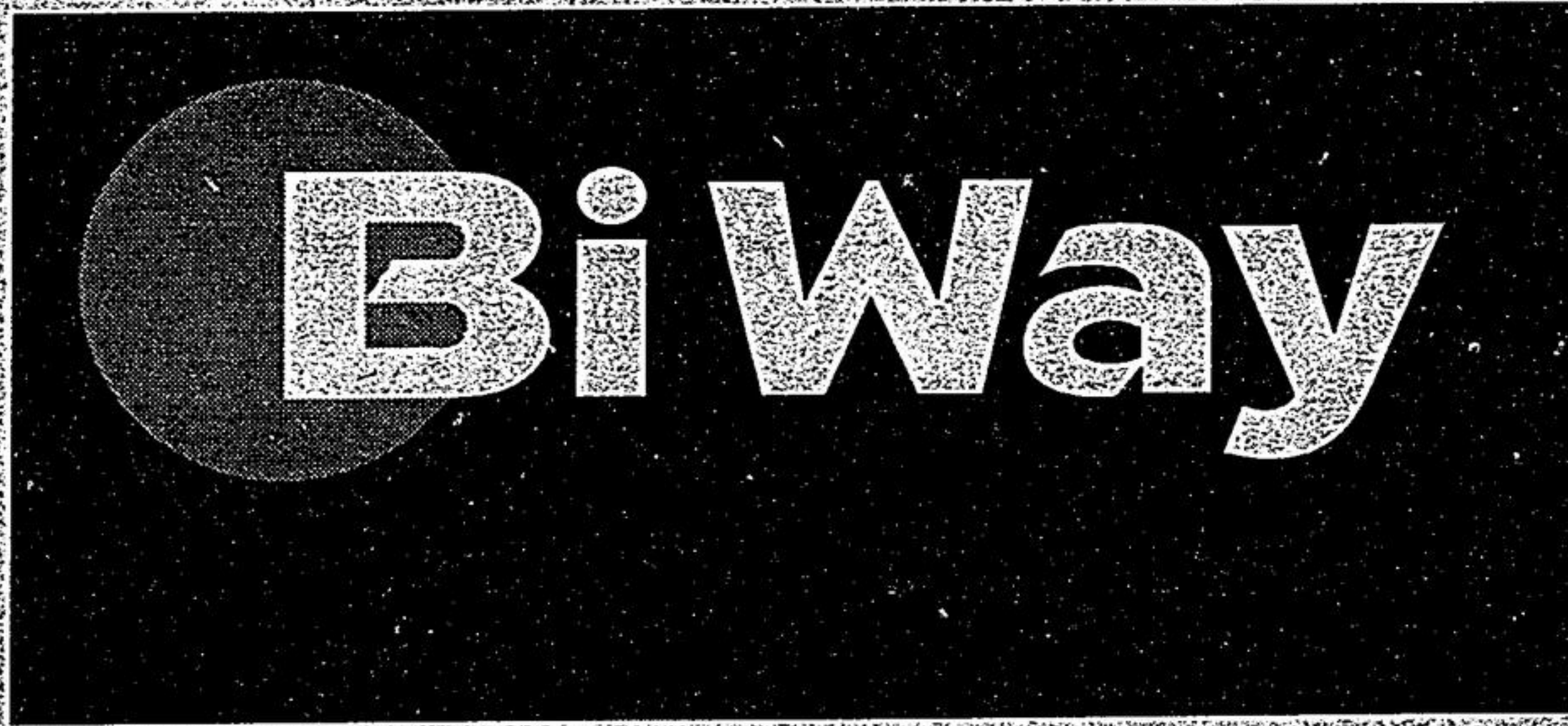
"We're not pleased — there are 600 jobs at stake here — but we have to go along with the process," she said.

The DFO reviewed 1,279 pieces of correspondence during the screening, most of them form letters from the public expressing concerns about loss of farmland, impact to wildlife, air and water quality and other issues.

Jim Robb, speaking for the 407 Action Group, said the organization will push for a full environmental assessment. "We don't think the federal government has done the job it needs to do by law."

Robb argued Dhaliwal can send the extension to a hearing if he thinks there are significant environmental effects, uncertain effects or a high level of public concern.

Fevreau said the consortium is concentrating its efforts on building the 407's western extension to the QEW and improvements to its central section, including a new interchange at Centre Street in Vaughan. Those changes will be the subject of the 407 ETR's open houses next week in Thornhill and Unionville.



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