

\$200,000 corridor report 'redundant,' Clark says

September 27, 2007

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THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

(Sep 27, 2007)

Former Ontario transportation minister Brad Clark says a report predicting huge economic gains from a Niagara-to-GTA provincial highway through Hamilton is a \$200,000 public relations document that prejudices the outcome of an environmental assessment (EA) now underway.

Council authorized splitting the cost 50-50 with Niagara Region in July 2006, before the ex-MPP was elected at the city level, and he argued yesterday that local taxpayers shouldn't have been saddled with the bill.

"Why would we be trying to get out in front of the EA with this PR document? The province will be doing an economic study. We've just done something that will be redundant."

The Stoney Creek councillor also complained the results were released in St. Catharines last June, but only given to Hamilton councillors three weeks ago, in violation of a procedural bylaw requiring that all city reports go to council members 24 hours before they are made public.

He called it "highly insulting" and "actually contempt of council."

Contents of the report were outlined at a special morning council meeting by Paula Dowell from the North Carolina firm Wilbur Smith and Associates, which drew up early plans in 1956 for what became the Lincoln M. Alexander and Red Hill Valley parkways. She will make a similar presentation to Niagara council tonight.

West Hamilton Councillor Brian McHattie -- who said he didn't remember authorizing the study -- criticized it for being too narrowly focused, ignoring environmental costs, peak oil warnings, climate change and other factors.

"Why didn't you take into account all those other things?" he asked.

Dowell said the terms of reference and spending limit were set by Niagara and Hamilton.

"It's not up to us to say whether that's the most important part. That's up to you."

Susan McMaster, a Flamborough resident speaking for Citizens Opposed to Paving the Escarpment, noted that Dowell had said the EA might result in a railway, not a road, but "you keep saying roads, roads, roads."

She reminded council that Burlington and Halton went to court to stop an earlier EA on grounds it didn't look at alternatives to a highway down the centre of the Niagara Peninsula. "Focus on a highway was the main reason that tanked the mid-peninsula highway process," McMaster said.

In the end, council voted simply to receive the report, without endorsing it.

As The Spectator reported yesterday, the consultants say a new highway from Fort Erie to Toronto would bring 130,000 to 170,000 jobs to Hamilton and Niagara by 2030, generating \$7 billion to \$9 billion in new income.

The consultants warn that doing nothing to ease road and rail congestion could cost the area more than \$2.4 billion and 30,000 jobs over the same period.

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