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## **Hudak promises mid-pen highway if elected Mayor doesn't believe Tory leader's intentions extend to Burlington**

**“This is a hot issue in north Burlington and it was a hot issue eight years ago, and I always thought it was bad enough they were making the connection from the 403 to the 407 and putting pressure on the urban rural boundary by doing so. This will be a big issue in the upcoming provincial election a year from now.” - Ward 3 Councilor John Taylor**

Ontario Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak was in Hamilton last Friday, where he announced that if he becomes premier in the fall 2011 provincial election, he would invest in a mid-peninsula highway.

Where that highway would be built, how much it would cost and if it would involve a route linking Hamilton to Burlington were not identified in the announcement, raising questions about what this could mean for this city and the Niagara Escarpment.

Joyce Savoline, Burlington MPP, was not at the Hamilton event, but said this week that these details were omitted because public consultation on the project by a PC government is needed.

“What Tim has said is, ‘Look, we have to figure it out in advance. If you look at the movement of goods through the area, we’ve really got to come up with some kind of solution,’” Savoline said. “He’s not nailing down any kind of detail, because there isn’t any kind of detail available yet.”

Meanwhile, the Dalton McGuinty government is in the first phase of the Niagara to GTA Corridor draft transportation study. The study is examining ways to improve the transportation system between Niagara and the GTA.

This summer, the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) revealed that among the preferred options considered in the study's environmental assessment is a corridor that would connect Hwy. 403 in Ancaster to Hwy. 407 at Walker's Line in north Burlington.

"The draft strategy features a new corridor at the east end connecting Welland to (the) QEW, a new corridor at the west end connecting Hwy. 403 near the Hamilton Airport to Hwy. 407 and monitoring of growth in the central area (Niagara to Hamilton) to determine when a new corridor will be required," said Derek Luk, a spokesperson for Transportation Minister Kathleen Wynne.

Members of city council balked at the idea, arguing the corridor should not cut across the environmentally-sensitive Niagara Escarpment and greenbelt, that it would increase in urbanization pressure in north Burlington and that the connection to a toll highway would discourage goods movement.

The city will be sending an official comment regarding the proposed corridor to the MTO by the end of the year. The official response has been delayed due to the fact there's an election this fall.

"We've been advised that if they get approval for this, then they want to focus on just that corridor and look at alternative alignments and facilities, whereas we think that is jumping to too much of a conclusion at this point," said Tom Eichenbaum, director of engineering with the City of Burlington, who explained that the MTO is about halfway through the environmental assessment phase. "For example, we think the corridor up to the 401 for a facility should not be dismissed at this point, so that is why this decision is critical."

Ward 3 Councillor John Taylor says he strongly opposes Hudak's push for a highway that could include a link to north Burlington.

"This is a hot issue in north Burlington and it was a hot issue eight years ago, and I always thought it was bad enough they were making the connection from the 403 to the 407 and putting pressure on the urban rural boundary by doing so," he said. "This will be a big issue in the upcoming provincial election a year from now." The proposed corridor would not likely be built for another 20-25 years, said MTO staff this summer.

The MTO says it takes time to plan for a new highway.

"The previous (PC) government launched into plans for building a mega-highway through some very important communities — that is not what we are doing," said Luk. "We know that different communities have different views on the mid-pen. Our Niagara corridor study takes a holistic approach. We want to get it right. That's why we used a research and an evidence-based approach. We are not going to just assume we need to pave a mega-highway through the greenbelt."

However, that timeline is not good enough, Savoline said.

“To shelve the process, in my opinion, is typical of a pattern that comes with this government that, ‘If it’s complicated, if we can’t figure out quickly enough and especially if we have to do a huge public process and talk to the people, we’re not up to that, so let’s just shelve this thing for the next 20 years,’” she said.

Mayor Cam Jackson said he is not concerned about Hudak’s announcement, as he understands that the PC leader intends to build a mid-pen highway that would run from Niagara to Hamilton, but not to Burlington.

He added that he has heard the two leading provincial parties are reluctant to run a corridor across the Niagara Escarpment.

“Both the Conservatives and Liberals have indicated that they are not supportive of moving the mid-pen highway through the escarpment in Burlington,” he said. “The city believes that putting the mid-pen highway through the escarpment is the worst thing that could happen.”

Local environmental groups like Protecting Escarpment Rural Land (PERL), Citizens Opposed to Paving the Escarpment (COPE) and the Hamilton Naturalists Club have spoken out against any route that would cut across the Niagara Escarpment.

“PERL has been meeting weekly for the last five years to prevent Nelson Aggregate from opening a new quarry on Niagara Escarpment rural lands on Mount Nemo, so we very strongly oppose the mid-peninsula highway cutting through and destroying more of the Niagara Escarpment, our unique world biosphere reserve,” a PERL spokesperson told the Post this week. “PERL has been working closely with COPE to prevent the mid-peninsula highway from destroying the Niagara Escarpment.”