

Time to focus on our infrastructure

Improving the province's transportation system is one that deserves to be among the top priorities; An open memorandum to the premier of Ontario

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Gridlock between Hamilton and Toronto is forecast to work

Premier, there are many things that affect the prosperity of Ontario. Some you can't control -- the dollar, interest rates and the border, to name a few.

But there are other priorities you can adopt that will make an enormous difference to this province's future.

Health care and education together absorb 60 per cent of the provincial budget and must remain top priorities. But infrastructure -- above all, the transportation infrastructure needed for the efficient, safe and environmentally friendly movement of people and goods -- deserves to be placed at the top of that list, too.

It may sound like a priority that only an engineer could love. But with effective communication, voters can come to understand how important infrastructure is for the well-being of Toronto and the Greater Golden Horseshoe region, and indeed for the economic vitality of Ontario as a whole.

It's time for the province to reassume its responsibilities in this area. In 1961, the province spent 31 cents of every infrastructure dollar and local governments spent 38

cents; by 2005, the province's share had fallen to 22 cents, while local governments funded 67 cents.

Furthermore, according to a recent report on civil infrastructure, in 2003 more than 72 per cent of Canada's infrastructure was more than 40 years old, and 41 per cent was more than 80 years old.

With only limited useful lifespan remaining for many of the province's roads, pipes and sewers, this is an appalling state of affairs -- all the more so for a region growing as fast as southern Ontario.

What's equally alarming is that no one at Queen's Park or in Ottawa knows the size of the problem. Estimates of the national need for investment in repairing, replacing and building new infrastructure (known as the "infrastructure gap") vary wildly -- from \$50 billion to \$125 billion in 2003. And the majority of this deficit falls to local governments to finance.

However, the lack of clarity and agreement on the extent of the decay and new needs makes it hard to know where to begin.

That's why one of the first things you should do is to commission a thorough examination of Ontario's infrastructure gap. Provincial investments in infrastructure should be based on the long-term benefits to Ontario's competitiveness, and integrated with sound land-use planning.

Addressing Ontario's shortfall in public transit will undoubtedly emerge high on the to-do list. Gridlocked roads and highways are already creating significant economic losses, not to mention health and environmental damage, across the Greater Golden Horseshoe; traffic congestion (estimated in 2003 to cost the economy of the GTA alone as much as \$1.6 billion per year) is a top business concern.

As jobs continue to decentralize across urban regions, the inadequacy of current public transit systems will only compound the problem.

If we don't shape growth intelligently in a way that reduces car dependence and provides user-friendly transportation alternatives, gridlock is forecast to worsen by up to 45 per cent over the next 30 years, with a typical trip from Hamilton to Toronto taking more than two hours.

The only solution is new investment in public transit systems. High-speed intercity rail links must also be part of the picture (for instance, in the Quebec City-Windsor corridor), which likely will require federal help to build.

The other part of the infrastructure solution lies in closing the well-documented shortfall between Ontario cities' spending requirements and their ability to raise revenue.

This fiscal gap has left cities unable to make the investments they so desperately need -- not just in infrastructure, but in all of the other areas that will make or break the competitiveness of our cities in years to come.

Toronto alone accounts for at least \$7.2 billion of the infrastructure deficit, according to conference board estimates. Beyond this gap, the city is desperately in need of resources to put toward the quality of life areas needed to attract and retain talented workers and business investment.

Giving Ontario's big cities the fiscal resources they need -- starting by covering the downloaded costs of social housing, for instance -- is a vital counterpart to direct provincial investment in transportation infrastructure.

Premier, don't be deterred by those who say that infrastructure is too costly or has too little voter appeal. The answer to these complaints is simple: Look not at what it costs but at what Ontario is losing by continuing to underinvest.

As gridlock worsens and water mains burst, voters understand the need and will support bold political leadership in modernizing Ontario's infrastructure.

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