

Chiarelli: Expanded highways an important part of Ottawa's transit plan

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Ottawa Citizen

Published on: May 30, 2016



Ottawa's transit commission is considering a proposal to offer a discount rate for low income riders. Errol McGihon / Postmedia

I was more than a bit surprised with David Reevly's recent critique about a major investment the Ontario Liberals are making in Ottawa-area highways. It takes more than a bit of creativity to complain about investments to improve the 416, the 417 and the 17 and helping relieve congestion for Ottawa-area commuters.

I expect that few drivers using the 417 during rush hour would agree with his conclusion that additional lanes of traffic — and in total nine unique highway improvement projects in the region — are unnecessary investments in our community. And I expect that few riders on new bus lines and those witnessing the once-in-a-generation construction of new light-rail system would agree that Ontario Liberals have ignored investment in Ottawa's public transit — it's about five times as much in transit as in roads.

Ontario has been a long-standing supporter of expanded public transit in Ottawa, including funding both phase one and phase two of the LRT, as well as \$30 million annually in gas tax funding. The point here is that to support our regional economic development — and our local quality of life — we have to move beyond the over-simplified premise that every highway widening is a senseless idea.

When it comes to transit and transportation, the solutions are often multi-modal. In short, it's not highways versus public transit, but recognition that we need a blend of the two.

Two generations of considerable suburban growth, the nearly tripling of our regional population and new regional highways, such as the 416 link to the 401, have grown our city in size and scale. By the early 2000s, when I was the first mayor of the amalgamated city of Ottawa, we saw the dramatic growth, change and expansion that our city and region had undertaken and also recognized that effective public transit should be based on a transit first policy. OC Transpo's existing bus network, the O-Train and under-construction Confederation Line LRT are a major draw for this city's quality of life.

But as our region has expanded, so has the need for increased economic infrastructure. Truck traffic brings vital goods to our community and delivers products to markets across the region and beyond. Congestion and bottlenecks have increased, especially as residents in once-distant communities such as Perth, Smith Falls, Rockland and even Cornwall, are increasingly travelling into the core for work, or to enjoy Ottawa's vibrant social and cultural atmosphere.

To support our region's economic growth, we need to invest in quality roads, bridges, highways, public transit and cycling infrastructure. To truly support our region's quality of life, we must support all forms of transit and transportation infrastructure within a transit first priority.

The provincial government recognizes that and will not be distracted by Mr. Reevly's back-seat driving. Our focus will remain on making the investments needed to ensure you're spending more time at home with your family and less time stuck on the road, with the maximum number of people using public transit.

Hon. Bob Chiarelli is the minister of energy and the MPP for Ottawa West-Nepean.