

Minister's comments reflect report recommendations Liberals eye 20-year plan for NGTA, Conservatives would move sooner

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News

Aug 03, 2011

The Ontario Progressive Conservatives are speeding towards constructing the Niagara-to-GTA corridor through Hamilton, says a local Tory candidate.

Donna Skelly says Liberal Transportation Minister Kathleen Wynne's statement this week that her government won't construct the highway within the next 20 years through sensitive environmental areas, including the Niagara Escarpment, is wrong.

"I think everything is on the table," said Skelly, the Tory candidate for Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale. "This isn't set in stone. We do have to meet with all the stakeholders, including businesses and farmers who own the land. We also have to find the best route to move goods, to move people."

Tory leader Tim Hudak has consistently stated if he forms the next provincial government he will "accelerate" the construction of the highway.

"I support Tim," said Skelly.

Former Tory leader Mike Harris supported the highway in 2001. But when Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty was elected in 2003, he halted the process, and ordered a new environmental assessment that is still going on.

"I recognize there are constituents within my riding that are opposed," said Skelly. "I do support it. I'm not being backed into a corner. I do believe once we are able to define a route, there are three different ways to hook up to the 401."

She didn't reject other options to link the 403 to the 401, including widening Hwy. 24 or constructing an entirely new highway.

"We have to deal with the issue of congested highways and move goods," she said.

During a roundtable discussion in Halton on July 26, Wynne stated the Liberals won't build the Niagara-to-GTA corridor, which would connect Hwy. 403 in Ancaster to north Burlington. "The previous government launched into plans for building a mega-highway through the Niagara Escarpment," said Wynne. "That is not what we are doing. We want to get it right."

Kelly Baker, communications advisor to the minister, said Wynne and the Liberals agree to the NGTA environmental assessment draft report recommendations, which were released last year. It stated a 130-km superhighway from Fort Erie to Burlington wasn't needed until 2031. Instead, the NGTA environmental assessment is examining other transportation options, including widening highways 401, 403, 407, 6 and the QEW, funding public transit, looking at air, rail and water transport, using new technologies and carpooling.

"We don't see a need to build a new corridor," said Baker, noting the government was baffled that Halton Region issued a news release in response to Wynne's comments as they reflected the NGTA's environment assessment report's recommendations.

She refused to say whether the Liberals have eliminated the highway option. And she couldn't say whether the Liberals would consider constructing the highway after 20 years. The NGTA study did look at two route options, with one that connects Hwy. 403 in Ancaster to Hwy. 401 west of Milton and another that links Hwy. 403 to Hwy. 407 near Walker's Line in Burlington.

The NGTA is continuing its planning and environmental assessment study, looking at alternative options. The study group is conducting additional analysis this year, including meeting with local municipal officials and agency staff. A final transportation development strategy is expected in 2012.

Ancaster-Dundas-Flamborough-Westdale Liberal MPP Ted McMeekin, agreed with his government not to build a highway that would mean blowing another hole through the Niagara Escarpment, plowing up farm land and destroying environmentally significant land. He said the highway is fast becoming the most important election issue in his riding.

"We are continuing to be committed to the environment," said McMeekin. "I absolutely agree the highway will irrevocably change the fabric of the community. That is not my priority. Hudak sounds like Mike Harris. He will build (the highway) without an environmental assessment."

NDP candidate Trevor Westerhoff said not building the highway means examining other options to improve the area's transportation problems. "We need increased investment in public transit, GO transit, and light-rail transit," he said.

"This is an opportunity to have a new and vigorous debate."

John Dolbec, former executive director of the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce, and now president of TransHub, was left scratching his head over Wynne's statement.

"I don't know what it means," he said.

The city of Hamilton, Halton, and the chamber were opposed to the Niagara-to-GTA highway plan that was being proposed after it was changed in June 2010.

So do Wynne's comments mean the province will go back to the original plan, or does it mean the Liberals have taken the project off the table? "It's a good thing to go back to the drawing board," said Dolbec. "The plan was held together with chewing gum and bailing wire."

He agrees the plan remains in a concept phase, with no specific route. But to improve Hamilton Airport's access, and provide economic benefits to the city, a highway from the border to Hwy. 401 can be built without going through the Niagara Escarpment, as long as it touches Hamilton.

"There can be compromise," said Dolbec. "Nobody has been ramrodding a route through the Niagara Escarpment. It would be a major mistake if they abandon the Mid-Pen."