

OPINION
& EDITORIALS



The CENTRAL NEWSPAPER

Founder & Publisher: Joe Ingino

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Tel: 905-432-2657

Email: newspaper@ocentral.com

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Ontario taxpayers foot the bill as transit costs spiral out of control

By Jay Goldberg

The Ford government priced the Ontario Line at \$10.9 billion. Seven years later, taxpayers face a bill of at least \$34 billion. At a time when government debt is soaring across the country, it's time for Canadians to demand that politicians be upfront about the cost of big projects before moving forward with them.

Last week, it was reported that the Ford government's Ontario Line, a 15.6-kilometre rapid transit project set to run through the heart of Toronto, will cost at least \$34 billion.

For context, when the project was first announced back in 2019, the Ford government pegged the cost of the new transit line at \$10.9 billion. In other words, the cost of this transit line has tripled in seven short years. And we're still at least half a decade away from the project's completion, meaning costs will surely balloon further still. The Ford government and Metrolinx, the Crown corporation tasked with building the new transit line, blame supply chain shocks and trade uncertainty for the cost surge. "When the Ontario Line began as a project, we lived in a different world in respect of major capital project delivery," said Metrolinx CEO Michael Lindsay.

That may be true. And that may justify part of the spike in the cost of the Ontario Line. But does anyone seriously believe that supply chain and trade issues could cause the cost of the project to more than triple, with further cost increases almost certain to come in the years ahead?

Whatever the explanation, taxpayers were told in 2019 that the Ontario Line would cost \$10.9 billion. Today, they're being told it will cost at least \$34 billion. Taxpayers deserve to know how that happened. Now that the government has already spent billions of taxpayer dollars on the project, taxpayers are past the point of no return. We're on the hook for the cost of this new rapid transit line, and there's very little taxpayers can do about it.

But had the public been better informed in 2019, resistance to the Ford government's proposal would likely have been stronger. Selling the public an infrastructure project with a \$10.9-billion price tag is very different from selling the public an infrastructure project that will cost well over \$30 billion.

Even transportation researcher Jonathan English, a major proponent of the Ontario Line, told CBC News that it's hard to determine why the Ontario Line is so expensive "because unlike in other jurisdictions...we don't have a lot of transparency around what the specific line items are."

Taxpayers ought to know what's driving up these costs. We should know what the specific line items are. And there's no good reason why taxpayers in other jurisdictions receive more information than Ontarians do. That lack of transparency matters because taxpayers are now committed to a project costing more than three times what they were originally told, without being able to see clearly why. The Ford government can hide behind Metrolinx when it comes to cost overruns, yet Metrolinx is incredibly secretive and won't share important cost information with the public. This arrangement allows politicians to largely get off the hook for this bungled transit line and place the blame on bureaucrats. But it was the Ford government, back in 2019, that told the public the Ontario Line would cost \$10.9 billion. So the Ford government, to a certain extent, must be held to account.

When it comes to major transit projects in the future, governments should be required to show the public independent analysis and clear cost projections when pitching major initiatives to the public. We shouldn't have to rely on the word of politicians because, far too often, they're wrong. Instead, we need to see where these cost projections come from so we can independently assess whether the government is lowballing the cost. Most importantly, taxpayers need that information before governments commit billions of dollars and projects reach the point where there is little realistic opportunity to turn back. The present approach, in which governments seem to pick numbers out of a hat and offer the public little to no explanation of where cost estimates come from, cannot continue.

At a time when government debt is soaring, taxpayers deserve full transparency about the costs of government initiatives before they move forward. By the time the bill has tripled and taxpayers are on the hook, that transparency comes far too late.

It's not too late to abolish the Indian Act

By Brian Giesbrecht

The Indian Act was meant to be temporary, but instead created a permanent legal divide that should be abolished. While only one per cent of the Canadian population lives on Indian reserves, that tiny population is constantly in the news. From court cases that pit Aboriginal title against established property rights to First Nations challenging Alberta's independence referendum process, their increasingly aggressive demands fill our courtrooms and newspapers. All of this flows from one statute passed early on: the Indian Act, which creates a system for reserve residents that is very different from the rules and laws that apply to everyone else. It is regarded as a relic of the past, but attempts to get rid of it over the years have all failed.

Why did we need it? The foundation of the Indian Act was the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857, which was itself based on recommendations from the 1844 Bagot Commission. Until that time, the colonial government had treated Indians only as tribes. During early colonization, when the French and British were fighting for control of the continent, this made sense. The various tribes allied with them in ways that suited each party's agendas.

But as the fur trade waned and settlers began arriving, it was clear that Indians would have to adapt to the white man's world. This would not be easily accomplished. Indians of the Northwest had resided from 1670 to 1870 mainly within Rupert's Land, which offered virtually nothing to the inhabitants in the way of government or educational opportunities. Worse still, disease, intertribal warfare and whisky had decimated the small, scattered Indian population.

Canada's founders concluded that the only solution to what was even then known as "the Indian Problem" was to place Indians in a special legal category as registered or "status" Indians. They were made "wards in tutelage," similar to children in school, and placed on reserves, where they would be temporarily protected and educated before being left to fend for themselves. But not all Indians were made "status" Indians. An Indian who graduated from university or entered certain professions could automatically lose his status through enfranchisement. The thinking was simple: he was presumed to be literate, capable and independent. It's necessary to look at the terms "assimilation" and "enfranchisement" because they are both largely misunderstood.

First of all, "assimilation" does not necessarily mean "forced assimilation." Indians could choose to become ordinary Canadian citizens through "enfranchisement," although the law also forced enfranchisement in some circumstances. Another term for "assimilation" is "integration." That was the same policy applied to all of the settlers arriving in Canada from different parts of the world. Both settlers and Indians were free to keep as much as they wanted of their culture and ethnic identity.

The next step was for the Indians to gradually become part of mainstream Canadian society by a process called "enfranchisement." The term "enfranchisement" is associated with voting. But it meant much more. An Indian choosing to be enfranchised was eligible to receive a per capita share of his band's trust funds and an allotment of 50 acres of reserve land in fee simple. He could stay on his reserve or sell his land to an Indigenous or non-Indigenous purchaser and move off the reserve. Reserves would gradually morph into stand-alone municipalities or merge with existing ones. In time, the reasons for a separate Indian system would disappear. Indians would be Canadian citizens with equal individual rights. Tribal rights would be a thing of the past.

It didn't work out that way. The federal government made the enfranchisement process unnecessarily complicated. More importantly, the chiefs did not want to see their band proceeds and reserve lands devolve to individuals, so those desperate to find a better life off reserve left with nothing. They arrived in cities completely unprepared for modern life. A short walk north on Winnipeg's Main Street graphically reveals the results. The myth that enfranchisement failed because Indians wanted to hold on to their culture is false. According to the 2021 census, 59.4 per cent of First Nations people with Registered or Treaty Indian status lived off reserve. They left because reserve culture had given them nothing. They would gladly have accepted an enfranchisement that would have put some money in their pockets. But enfranchisement failed. So the vision of our founders—that the separate Indian system would naturally come to an end—did not happen. A race-based system that was meant to offer temporary protection has now become entrenched. The Indian Act has outlived its purpose and should be abolished.

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Letters To The Editor:

WHAT IS ON YOUR MIND? Send letters to newspaper@ocentral.com

Dear Editor:

The GO Transit Durham Improvement Program.

Metrolinx is proposing to extend its GO Rail service eastward from Oshawa to Bowmanville along the CPKC corridor; this is known as the Lakeshore East Extension Program. This will require a rail interconnection from the current Lakeshore line on the CN corridor and a railway bridge over Hwy401. Distinct scenarios have been considered and these, which will not be discussed here, all have serious technical, economic and functional limitations.

There is however a better option from a transit perspective that has none of these limitations. It provides service to Bowmanville while extending it to new areas west of Oshawa and later on, within the Toronto area. It is tentatively referred to as the Cross-Durham Rail Program.

This proposal makes use of the CPKC corridor to serve the recently urbanised northern areas, such as Whitby/Brooklyn, Ajax, Pickering/Seaton, as well as residents and drivers from surrounding communities. This would also improve the connectivity with the TTC transit system.

In a first phase of the program, the CPKC corridor would be used between Oshawa and the Agincourt area where it crosses over the Stouffville GO corridor; this is basically where the CPKC double track line crosses over the West Highland Creek. This intersection is ~0.40km east of Kennedy Rd and ~0.35km south of Sheppard Av E.

A rail interconnection built at this location would allow GO Rail movements to transition between the CPKC and the Stouffville corridors. West of this point, all current Lakeshore GO stations from the Scarborough to Union stations would be accessible as they are now, whereas East of this point would be the new stations on the CPKC along the corridor to Bowmanville.

In addition, the GO trains originating in Durham would now have direct access to the Kennedy station, thereby allowing connection with both the TTC subway and the cross-town LRT. This would be a significant improvement for transit in the eastern part of the GTA.

Given the expected traffic levels, this does not initially require dedicated trackage along the entirety of the CPKC corridor, as a suitably upgraded Rail Traffic Control (RTC) system can optimise operational logistics, such as resources sharing, and provide bi-directional capabilities. This would also reduce the need for the widening of rail bridges along the route.

Currently, both the western and northern regions around Toronto each have three GO Transit rail lines (Aldershot/Milton/Georgetown and Barrie/Richmond Hill/Stouffville), whereas its eastern region only has one such line. The large investments currently contemplated by Metrolinx would do nothing to correct this anomaly if the work is limited to the Oshawa-Bowmanville area.

Recently awarded contracts for the Oshawa station have provision for the Bowmanville extension, but there appears to be yet no binding agreements relating to an interconnection or a bridge. This proposed scenario should be seriously considered, along with a rigorous cost/benefit analysis before any further commitments are made. Fortunately, the investments already made along the CPKC corridor are unaffected, as they are an integral part of this proposal.

This proposal may well set the stage for a future Toronto mid-town GO Rail service along the CPKC corridor with connections to the Yonge St subway, the GO Transit Barrie line and the UP Express. This would be in subsequent phases of the program.

Paul A Larose, Ph.D., CN Transportation (retired)

Editor's note: The author had the privilege to work at CN with the two "conceptual fathers" of the GO Rail Transit system, namely Messrs Wiif Sergeant and Norm Hanks.

Dear Editor:

With so many candidates seeking office across Oshawa, voters must look beyond lawn signs and catchy slogans. Fresh ideas are welcome, but enthusiasm alone cannot manage budgets, evaluate development proposals or oversee public services. Candidates with little experience should explain how they will prepare for these responsibilities and whose advice they will seek. Experienced candidates must also defend their records. Nobody deserves a seat simply for being new or familiar. Ask tough questions, attend debates and demand practical answers. Oshawa needs representatives who understand the job, respect taxpayers and are willing to learn before making decisions that affect us all.

Jeff Drew, Oshawa

Dear Editor:

I cannot afford gasoline. I cannot afford another expense eating away at money already stretched between groceries, housing, utilities and insurance. Every time I approach a gas station, I wonder how much further my budget can bend before it breaks. Where are prices going to stop? More importantly, when will ordinary working people finally get some breathing room? For many families, driving is not a luxury. We need our vehicles to get to work, take children to school, attend medical appointments and care for relatives. Public transit is not always available, practical or compatible with our schedules. Simply telling people to drive less ignores how they actually live. A trip to visit family now requires a financial calculation. An unexpected appointment means finding money somewhere else. Filling the tank can mean putting fewer groceries in the cart or postponing another bill. I understand that gasoline prices can fluctuate. Understanding that does not make the next fill affordable. Families need more than explanations while they watch their purchasing power disappear. I want governments to explain what meaningful relief they can provide and how they will measure whether it reaches consumers. I want clear answers, realistic proposals and accountability, rather than another round of finger-pointing. We work, pay taxes and try to make responsible choices. Yet doing everything right increasingly feels insufficient. A full tank should not require an empty fridge. How much more are families expected to sacrifice before someone recognizes that we have already reached our limit?

Darcy Snow, Ajax

SEND LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

 newspaper@ocentral.com

or

mail to 136 Simcoe St. North Suite 4 Oshawa