

News

Is removing trucking tolls on Highway 407 a better traffic congestion solution than Highway 413?

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By Rose Danen



Ontario Premier Doug Ford makes an announcement about building transit and highways in Bowmanville, Ont., Friday, May 6, 2022. (Aaron Vincent Elkaim/The Canadian Press)

The Ontario NDP moved a motion at the beginning of March to remove the tolls on Highway 407 for transport trucks, saying it would shorten commute times in the

GTHA.

But behind this motion is also a years-long push from advocates and a recent research study that suggests removing tolls for truckers on Highway 407 is a cheaper, more effective, and more environmentally conscious alternative to the proposed Highway 413.

Removing 407 tolls for truckers was first proposed as an alternative traffic congestion solution to building Highway 413 by Transport Action Ontario in 2020. Increased interest in this idea by the trucking sector led to the TAO conducting a cost analysis in 2021 that suggested subsidizing truck tolls would cost less than half of what it would cost to construct and maintain Highway 413.

It was this analysis that caught the eye of the Ontario Green Party leader, Mike Schreiner.

“I’ve been pushing it ever since because it just makes so much financial and environmental sense. It’s just such a common sense solution,” said Schreiner.

Schreiner pushed heavily for the truck subsidy as a traffic congestion solution during the 2022 provincial election. He recently began amping up his efforts again after Environmental Defence put out a new traffic study in September.

The Ontario NDP referenced this study while making the case for their motion.

Tim Gray, executive director of Environmental Defence, said this study was the necessary quantitative evidence needed to back up a “kind of obvious” solution that had been talked about for years.

“Intuitively it made a lot of sense before, but now we actually have some numbers we can work with,” said Gray.

The traffic study, conducted by Eunomia Research & Consulting, found that removing trucking tolls on the 407 would move 12,000 to 21,000 trucks per day off the 401, heavily reducing traffic congestion on the 401 and reducing trucker travel times by approximately 80 minutes. Plus, it confirmed the TAO’s analysis, concluding that a trucking toll subsidy would only cost Ontario \$4 billion over a 30-year period—\$6 billion less than the cost of constructing Highway 413.

“We would make driving for people in cars on the 401 faster and safer. And we would save the trucking industry time, money, and emissions that cause climate change,” said Gray.

“And it can be done very quickly. The 413 would take at least a decade, if not longer to be built. Whereas diverting trucks off the 401 to the 407 is a pretty immediate solution,” said Schreiner.

Subsidizing trucking tolls also has the potential to alleviate the \$1 billion congestion penalty owed by the 407 ETR owner, 407 International Inc. (which is majority-owned by Canada Pension Plan Investments).

“To me, it makes an even stronger argument... for the Ford government to negotiate something like this. Like why not say the first billion is in lieu of what they owe the province,” said Schreiner. “But the Ford government has just consistently avoided holding the 407 responsible for that.”

Schreiner also pointed to how removing trucking tolls can avoid environmental damage.

“The 413 is going to have more significant environmental damage paving over 200 acres of prime farmland...,” said Schreiner. “And the 413, in addition to all that, it’s just going to unleash more expansive sprawl development in the GTA.”

Schreiner tabled a motion on Feb. 20 that stated that the provincial government should cancel its plan to build Highway 413, and instead reduce congestion on the 401 by subsidizing truck tolls on Highway 407.

Despite the motions made by the NDP and Greens, the Ford government has maintained that building the 413 is the solution to traffic congestion. The PCs — who have a majority in the legislature — voted down both motions.

But, as Gray points out, time and time again, building new highways in North America have rarely resulted in less congestion.

“Building more highways causes something called ‘induced demand,’ and you end up having them fill up. So, the long term solution to highway congestion is never more highways,” said Gray.

An expert panel commissioned by the former Liberal provincial government concluded in 2017 that Highway 413 would only save drivers an average of 30 to

60 seconds on their commutes. The Ford government has insisted that it would actually save commuters 30 minutes.

“It makes it even more important that the federal government—which has designated this highway for federal impact assessment—that they proceed with that...,” said Gray. “They can determine if this is in the public’s interest to have this highway built with all of its cost and impacts, when there are clearly viable alternatives available.”



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