

No money for nurses and teachers but hundreds of millions for the Highway of Zeroes

More to the Story

By Ben Bennett

Enjoy the summer, folks, because this fall we can likely look forward to various kinds of job action in our public sector.

The Province, with a massive debt and still with a huge deficit, has indicated it is looking to its employees, and those who use the health and education systems – i.e. all of us -- to bear the brunt of the austerity to come.

It is not, it seems, looking to the corporate sector to help with problem, presumably out of fear that more big companies will leave Ontario, even though they currently enjoy a lower combined tax rate than even the United States.

The tragedy here is not that just that it is unfair and politically foolish. The tragedy is that if they looked a little harder, the bean counters would probably find all sorts of places where savings could be found.

And local politicians, it could be argued, are complicit in perpetuating the problem, and could end up losing their chance at serious transit connections.

But before we explore that, let's confer kudos on Kathleen Wynne and her government for their aggressive stand on transit and infrastructure. They have been making the right noises for the past year about offering alternatives to highway commuting through an expanded GO system, and Charles Sousa's budget continues that conversation.

This region has been promised all-day trains to and from Toronto within a few years or up to 10 years, depending on the source. Our mayor made a point in his recent State of the City address to note his meetings with the Province on the issue and "the excellent business case to support all-day, two-way GO train service".

But here's a question.

If the Province is already planning to spend \$400 million in the Guelph-KW area, what chance do we have in getting that kind of financial commitment again anytime soon?

Yes, I am talking about the Highway of Zeroes (no real value but many 0's in the cost) from here to K-W, this ridiculous waste of tax dollars aimed at saving local commuters

5-10 minutes day. The fact that hundreds of acres of prime farm land will be destroyed forever, not to mention the significant environmental damage, doesn't seem to be an issue for the decision-makers, so the financial argument may be the only one that can gain any traction.

There is a small army of local commentators who complain bitterly every time the local budget comes along. Where have they been? The area chambers of commerce, those bastions of sound business practice, have all been cheerleaders for spending provincial taxpayer dollars on this nonsense, as have all our local councils.

Would they be so quick to line up at the highway trough if it meant the odds of provincial dollars for transit were lowered? There is only so much money in the pot.

With \$400 million already allocated for Highway 7, how can Liz Sandals seriously argue in cabinet for this area to receive yet more largesse at the expense of other areas, whose needs are, let's face it, much greater than ours.

Everyone gets that Ontario has huge financial challenges. And no one will surely argue that this area is suffering from any lack of growth and development, even if some commuters to K-W do sometimes have a little congestion on their way to work. (They should try driving to Toronto every day.)

Just as there are projects in this area that, in hindsight, may have made sense in the 1970s when they were proposed, there are probably other places in Ontario with similar out-of-date initiatives on the books that no one has reviewed for 21st century Ontario.

True leadership from our local government could be shown by getting together and telling the Province that we are fine with widening of the existing Highway 7 instead of building an entirely new freeway. This should be done very publically and should include an invitation to other areas to look seriously at already committed projects that may not make sense in this climate.

We'd have a pretty good argument then for an all-day GO train in my lifetime.

And maybe the Province could thaw the wage freeze a little and garner some peace this fall.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at www.bbc.guelph.org.)