

# Money is tight: let's not get greedy when asking for provincial dollars

*More to the Story*

By Ben Bennett

Somewhere on the desk of Ontario Finance Minister Charles Sousa's is a very interesting and bold proposal. It has the potential for some major changes in the way the Province addresses the future of transportation.

In the past three months, three things have happened that got me thinking that this vision for the area might just be doable.

The first was when the proposal came to public attention. Back in December, as part of a growing and welcome cooperation, the cities of Kitchener, Waterloo and Guelph joined the Region of Waterloo in calling on the Province to get serious about train service. Representatives of the hi-tech sector were also on board (so to speak).

Their argument was not about energy use or the environment; it was all about business and jobs.

It was based on a report put together by Kitchener's economic development department that concluded a major investment by the Province to bring the area's train service up to date would be paid back through increased investment and thousands of jobs. This area could rival Silicon Valley as a technology hub, it says.

Most of the costs, it seems— about \$300-odd million — would be for improvements to the CN North Mainline. Taxes generated from new high-tech jobs along that route would more than pay for those improvements, as well as for costs for a GO Train service that runs both ways, all-day long.

(Let's pause here for some non-business reflection about how great that would be.)

In February, Kitchener Mayor Carl Zehr reportedly met with Mr. Sousa and Kitchener Centre MPP John Milloy to further the case for improved rail service, noting, no doubt, that the federal government has also put some serious cash on the table for infrastructure.

This may all be a bit pie-in-the-sky for some but I can't see all those politicians putting their reputations on the line for an idea that doesn't have some promise.

The reality is, though, that there is only so much provincial largesse with our tax dollars out there and we cannot expect it all to come our way.

Now here's the third thing. This past week, the Record carried a story saying the Province still claims it has the mythical Highway 7 freeway on its books. Those who still give any statements about this freeway any credibility will note that the cost estimate was about \$300 million. That's an old number but even so it is remarkably close to the number estimated in 2014 for the railway improvements.

So here's a thought.

If the Province does indeed have \$300 million or so set aside for this area to assist the movement of goods and people, it likely doesn't have much more for anything else.

Former Premier Dalton McGuinty may have hoped that promising to build the freeway would win him the Kitchener by-election 18 months ago, but it didn't. The retiring PC was replaced by a New Democrat. (Either way, the price tag would have been cheaper than moving a power plant.) But do the Liberals want to have that kind of connotation associated with the project? I think not.

Would it not make more sense to benefit the entire area by using the cash to beef up the rail service from Toronto to Kitchener? That won't just make life a bit more convenient, it would mean we could start getting serious about transit as an alternative mode of transportation, not just a cute idea.

Premier Kathleen Wynne has been fairly clear that we won't deal with the gridlock choking our roads unless we make substantial investments in transit. And if that means taxes of some kind, then so be it.

This is a position that sets the Liberals apart, not surprisingly, from the PCs, but also from the New Democrats who, very surprisingly, seem to be taking the populist "no taxes" road but are not offering any solutions to the congestion.

If our local mayors and regional chair suggested they would be okay with deferring the Highway 7 freeway and instead have the funds committed towards transit improvement, the Premier might just go for it.

They'd better be quick, though.

The provincial budget and the election that will follow are just a few weeks away.

(Ben Bennett's past columns can be found at [www.bbc.guelph.org](http://www.bbc.guelph.org).)