

New openness has region eyeing more public transit funds

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WATERLOO REGION — A second, southern leg of Waterloo Region's light rail system may still be years away, but local politicians are encouraged by changing attitudes at Queen's Park and in Ottawa around how major public transit projects should be paid for.

This week, new federal infrastructure minister Amarjeet Sohi said it's time to revisit the common practice of having cities pay a third of the costs — as was the case for the region's first phase of the light rail transit.

Ontario's Wynne government has also shown it's willing to fully fund light rail transit projects elsewhere, including in Hamilton, Mississauga and Brampton. Which is why local transit advocates were stunned last month when councillors in Brampton actually turned down \$400 million in provincial funds for its own light rail transit.

"I think you've got every metropolitan area in Ontario looking at that \$400 million," said Cambridge Mayor Doug Craig.

Waterloo Region's leaders were understandably miffed because the province had refused to pay more than a third of their own \$2-billion light rail price tag. Seeing a neighbouring city walk away from funds they so desperately wanted was difficult.

"It's sometimes frustrating watching other communities who haven't done much to help themselves get things done for them," said Region of Waterloo chair Ken Seiling.

"It's tough to watch municipalities who couldn't even get a council resolution to build anything get offered full funding, and yet we're being told 'You negotiated too early, so too bad, so sad.'"

The region can't make any claim to the millions Brampton turned down, however. It comes from public transit funds earmarked for the Greater Toronto Area and Hamilton.

But if there's a silver lining, it's that there appears to be a new precedent for the province to pay a greater share of light rail transit projects in the future — which should be good news for supporters of Waterloo Region's plans to expand light rail into Cambridge.

The Wynne government says the Mississauga and Hamilton projects were fully funded because the government will own the rail transit system, unlike in Waterloo Region. They point out that this region's light rail transit was approved by a previous provincial regime, too.

But that's hard to explain to Waterloo Region residents, whose property taxes will help subsidize the costs.

"To any person, you would see there's an inequity," said regional councillor Sean Strickland. "That needs to be addressed somehow, and we're hoping it'll be addressed in the coming months."

Michael Druker, a transit advocate and co-founder of the TriTAG group, believes the timing is good to push for funding for the second phase of the light rail transit through Cambridge.

"I'm hopeful we'd be able to get full funding from the government," he said. "I think the overall tone around transit projects is changing, and there's room for accelerating this process."

Brampton's "no" vote is also proof that public transit funding is better spent in communities that already want light rail transit, he said. And Druker sees no need to delay, arguing construction could start in Cambridge before Phase 1 is finished in late 2017.

Mayor Craig thinks that's a little early, and says it could take "20 to 30 years" before ridership levels in his city are high enough to justify a light rail system. But Druker says it should be about progressive urban planning, not waiting to solve a transit problem.

The mayor is encouraged, however, by the provincial and federal governments' new openness to paying more of the costs of public transit projects.



The Region of Waterloo has ordered 14 of these Bombardier trains for the light rail transit system through Kitchener and Waterloo, set to start running in 2017.

"The fact the province and the federal government have now both stepped up to the plate in terms of recognizing the infrastructure deficits with respect to transit, it's extremely encouraging for all of us," he said.

The region is "still talking to the province" about new transit funding that may be available, Seiling added, and it hopes to learn more about how future funds will be doled out.

But the lineup for public transit funding is increasingly crowded. On top of Hamilton and Mississauga's light rail transit projects, London also wants light rail, and Ottawa's Confederation Line is under construction and expected to open in 2018.

Even politicians in Windsor want in on the light rail transit action, with calls for a rail line linking the communities of Amherstburg and LaSalle and their downtown. Seiling, however, is optimistic Waterloo Region won't be left out.

"This is a government that has staked a lot on transit, and my sense is they're going to want to continue to promote transit," Seiling said. "I think there are opportunities out there, but we have to put the best case forward."

In Brampton, the decision to turn down the province's transit money has left some deep disappointment. Despite overwhelming public support for the project, councillors couldn't agree on the route the rail line would take through downtown.

Brampton city councillor Gurpreet Dhillon said his city had a "historic" chance to build a light rail line that would have revitalized its struggling downtown core as part of an integrated regional transit system.

Locally, meanwhile, politicians are looking at the Brampton case and left scratching their heads.

"It's hard for me to understand the rationale behind that decision," Coun. Strickland said. "I think it's a decision they'll regret in the long run ... They've lost that money and the chance to build their community for the future. In some ways, that's a shame."

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