

Mark Holland, M.P., Ajax-Pickering



 Mark
Holland
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Issues & Legislation

A Train to Peterborough – the wrong priority for Durham

Opinion piece by Mark Holland, M.P. for Ajax-Pickering

Apparently, Durham region's side of the GTA is getting a share of the Harper government's "public transit capital infrastructure" fund, announced by Finance Minister Jim Flaherty during February's federal budget speech. But this investment will not give Durham residents more GO trains that are serviced by more buses that drive on safer roads. Scratch the surface of what's actually being offered, and what emerges is a dubious deal.

Cited to get first dibs of the \$500 million fund are three projects in the nation's three biggest cities. Federal cash for two of them seem sensible: a new sky-train route for Greater Vancouver, and a train linking Trudeau International Airport with downtown Montreal. While these projects enjoy popular support by the public and regional transportation authorities in their respective cities, the government's choice for the GTA does not.

Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's pick to give Peterborough a \$200 million rail link to downtown Toronto has left the public, transportation authorities and all levels of government scratching their heads, wondering why, in a city desperate for funds to expand public transit services and roadways, the Conservatives are bypassing urgent transportation priorities in favour of a costly project that will benefit very few.

The few that would stand to benefit include Conservative MPs through whose ridings the rail runs. Starting with Finance Minister Flaherty's own Whitby-

Oshawa riding, the railway links a succession of Conservative ridings up to and including Peterborough.

Is this a case of pork-barrel politics? Perhaps. Backing that interpretation is the fact that no economic case has been made to justify a train. The original service along the line was discontinued almost 20 years ago by Via Rail because there were not enough users to justify its existence. Though the areas around Toronto have seen significant growth in that time, subsequent studies conducted continue to reinforce the conclusion that this rail line is not a cost-effective proposition.

It's when the Peterborough train goes through the contentious northern edge of Ajax-Pickering—the riding that I represent as an MP—that a certain suspicion grows undeniable. The Peterborough line would provide rail service to a future airport in north Pickering.

Though sod has never been broken, an airport has been slated to be built there since 1972. It has been controversial. Area residents have fought confiscation, eviction, demolition and obfuscation by federal authorities which have consistently resisted letting residents know about or participate in decisions affecting their future. And many have long decried the threat that an airport would pose to the GTA's last remaining natural watershed and farmland.

Since the Harper Conservatives formed government, Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon cancelled the unofficial moratorium on further evictions that the previous Liberal government had agreed to. Moreover, Minister Cannon acted unethically by allowing the Greater Toronto Airport Authority, the prospective developer of a Pickering airport, to conduct its own "peer review" into whether an airport is needed—a glaring conflict of interest.

These actions raise serious questions. Has the Conservative government abandoned its promise to remain neutral, and instead taken the side in favour of airport development? Does the Peterborough line point at political interference by Conservative ministers in the process that determines the future development of north Pickering?

I am on the record as strongly opposing the development of an airport in Pickering, and have held Transport Canada, while under both Liberal and Conservative administrations, to account for all major developments on this issue. Given that Pearson Airport has the capacity to absorb growth for decades to come, and that there is an existing major airport in Hamilton willing and able to handle any overflow, an airport in Pickering would become another Mirabel. In addition, we must consider that transportation objectives

will change in the future, as environmental and more cost-effective alternatives are developed.

The Conservatives have to answer not only to residents of Durham region, but the GTA and Peterborough, for their costly spin on a rail line. Whatever their motives may be, the government must explain to us why they are putting their very limited infrastructure funding into a Peterborough rail line instead of addressing our regions' most urgent transportation needs.

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