

Toronto Region Board of Trade Submission on Bill 171 (Building Transit Faster Act)

Submission to: Standing Committee on Social Policy, Ontario Legislative Assembly

Submission by: The Toronto Region Board of Trade

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The Toronto Region Board of Trade welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission for consideration by the Standing Committee on Social Policy on Bill 171, the Building Transit Faster Act, 2020. The TRBOT has long been deeply involved in transportation and infrastructure advocacy, since the Toronto region's economy depends on reliable and efficient public transportation.

Bill 171 (Building Transit Faster Act, 2020) is a valuable step forward for realizing the urgently needed transit projects that will keep our economy growing. The four priority projects listed in the act will all offer valuable extensions of the rapid transit network, improving travel times and reliability for riders, and improving access to jobs for people across the Toronto Region. We strongly support the government's plan to reform various aspects of planning and delivering transit projects, including mandating municipal and utility cooperation, protecting future transit corridors from incompatible development, and not requiring proof of necessity each time in the expropriation process. We call on the government to extend these valuable reforms to all major transit infrastructure projects across Ontario, so that the benefits are not limited to the City of Toronto alone.

The Need for Change

These reforms will make a meaningful contribution to increasing the speed and reducing the cost of delivering essential transit projects. Residents have become increasingly cynical about the prospect of meaningful transit infrastructure improvement within a reasonable time frame. This needs to change.

Partly as a result of these delays, Toronto's transit infrastructure construction costs have risen far faster than inflation in recent decades. This is increasingly challenging governments' abilities to deliver the transit enhancements that the region desperately needs. Part of the explanation for these cost increases lies in the cumbersome requirements to secure the land and approvals needed to begin construction. Genuine community consultation is essential to make sure that any major infrastructure project has as little negative effect as possible, but it must not become an insurmountable obstacle to a transit improvement that is vital to the region as a whole.

It is inappropriate that they be subject to the same stringent assessment process as an environmentally destructive highway project. Public transportation projects have a positive environmental effect, and they are desperately needed in the Toronto Region in order to fight the scourges of climate change, air pollution, and urban sprawl.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its accompanying economic crisis, make the need for long-term infrastructure investment even more urgent. The need for economic stimulus also means that we need shovels to hit the ground as quickly as possible.

Recommendations

1. Expanding the Scope of Reform

The Toronto Region Board of Trade urges the Government of Ontario to expand the legislation to encompass all major public transit infrastructure projects across the province. There is no reason why equally necessary projects, like the Hurontario LRT and the GO-RER program, should not also benefit from these reforms.

Metrolinx's 2041 Regional Transportation Plan includes dozens of transit infrastructure capital projects. Many of them are led by the province, which would make them ideally suited for inclusion in this legislation. We also encourage the government to enable municipally led projects to also benefit from provisions like transit corridor protection.

2. Corridor Protection

One of the most valuable provisions of the legislation is the ability of the Minister to designate a transit corridor and to require a permit for any type of construction within that corridor. There are many precedents that demonstrate the potential for significant cost savings through the long-term protection of a transit corridor. Corridors like the Ontario Line and Eglinton West have had plans for rapid transit that date back to the 1960s. Maintaining a designated corridor until construction is able to begin both precludes developments that would interfere with the planned transit project and enables businesses and property owners to make informed long-term decisions.

London's Crossrail project is only possible because the corridor of the new line has been safeguarded from interfering development since the early 1990s. There are many transit projects that have been in the pipeline in Ontario for decades, but the funds have not been available for construction to begin. Expanding the provisions of this legislation to enable corridor protection by both the province and municipalities beyond the four priority projects would mean that transit projects that we know will be built one day will not be made more expensive and disruptive by the presence of incompatible developments. It also means that property owners will be provided with information to make better decisions, since they would no longer be in the dark about what their property might be used for in the future.

R.C. Harris famously included a provision for a subway in the Prince Edward Viaduct. Decades later, Toronto reaped the benefits when the Bloor-Danforth subway was built at a much lower cost than would otherwise have been possible. The Province of Ontario has ambitious long-term transportation plans for the Toronto Region, and their corridors should be designated and protected. The same opportunity is available today for our descendants to thank us for our foresight.

Bill 171 (Building Transit Faster Act, 2020) is an important step toward delivering transit projects more quickly and at a more reasonable cost. The Toronto Region Board of Trade is pleased to support the legislation. We furthermore call on the government to extend the legislation so that vitally needed infrastructure projects right across the province can benefit from the reforms, and to enable more widespread implementation of transit corridor protection so that landowners can make long-term plans and future projects can be delivered more cost-effectively and less disruptively.