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Spacing and Innovative Research transit poll: Skepticism on revenue tools

MAY 27, 2013 | BY JOHN LORINC



JOHN LORINC

This is the first of two columns by John Lorinc today as Metrolinx announces the revenue tool recommendations for The Big Move. John will file an update after the 11am release.

With Metrolinx releasing its long-awaited investment strategy today, an exclusive *Spacing* poll shows that scarcely more than a quarter of GTHA residents are prepared to back a regional sales tax hike to raise funds to pay for a generation's worth of transit and congestion-busting investments across the region.

Furthermore, only 17% of all respondents agreed that individual taxpayers should foot the bill for Metrolinx's next wave of Big Move projects. Indeed, almost four in ten felt that transit users should pick up the tab. Interestingly, 44% felt the cost should be borne by businesses and developers, while 60% of the respondents said that the private sector should be more involved in financing these projects.

As for the revenue tools themselves, the poll — conducted earlier this month by [Innovative Research Group](http://www.innovativeresearch.ca/) (<http://www.innovativeresearch.ca/>)* — revealed that residents were most likely to favour four sorts of taxes — development charges, parking space levies, HOT lanes, and highway tolls — over all the other mechanisms floated by the regional agency earlier this spring. Those four, some of which have turned up as top choices in other recent polls, are the only ones on Metrolinx's short-list to merit "net positive support," meaning the total number of respondents in favour exceeds those opposed.

Problem is, Metrolinx officials have said in recent weeks that highway tolls won't be considered until a lot more transit is up and running. Moreover, two of the tools that passed muster with the public in the *Spacing/Innovative* poll — development charges and HOT lanes — aren't big money-makers.

The [AECOM study of the revenue tools](http://www.bigmove.ca/investing-in-our-future/evaluating-the-tools) (<http://www.bigmove.ca/investing-in-our-future/evaluating-the-tools>) released in March estimated the net revenue from HOT lanes is probably no more than \$100 million annually. Development charges can bring in a further \$50 million. As for the parking space levy, it could raise over \$400 million per year, but AECOM cautions that it would be like a property tax and would therefore have to be adopted by individual municipalities, which adds an element of uncertainty and plenty of delay.

In sum, while 55% of GTHA drivers reports that their commute is getting worse and three in four residents feel more transit is the way to change the channel on congestion, the lukewarm support for acceptable but low-impact revenue tools underscores the magnitude of the challenge Premier Kathleen Wynne's minority government faces as it gears up to find ways to raise about \$2 billion a year.

What makes her agenda even more daunting is that the public's awareness of Metrolinx's grand plan, though certainly greater than it was a year or two ago, remains modest, especially outside the 416 (45% of all residents have heard of The Big Move, with that figure rising to 57% inside the 416).

Lastly, the poll findings indicate that City of Toronto residents are substantially more troubled by the state of transit, congestion and road maintenance than those in the rest of the region. That skew poses another set of political dilemmas, because the proposed taxes and levies will be imposed right across the GTHA, not just in the aggrieved and gridlocked 416.

Metrolinx has been careful to create a blueprint that is intended to bring new transit investment to the entire region — subways are slated for some areas, while others will see BRTs, LRTs and enhanced GO service. Yet even with these new projects, the reality is that 905 transit usage will remain relatively low for decades to come because of long established low-density development patterns.

In other words, Metrolinx and the provincial government need to persuade residents right across the GTHA that the overall transportation network benefits of all these investments in new transit projects will be felt broadly, as opposed to just within the corridors where these new lines will run.

For a government in a hurry, they have an awful lot of educating to do before they move to bring forward legislation imposing this new fiscal reality on the GTHA.

Other recent public opinion research on Metrolinx's investment strategy:

- **Ipsos Reid poll** (<http://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2013/ex/bgrd/backgroundfile-57596.pdf>) for City of Toronto — (1,548 respondents, March 25-April 2):
 - The most commonly cited revenue tools: development charges (68%), parking levy (58%), HOT lanes (49%), congestion charge (46%), payroll tax (41%). Of the other taxes and levies, highway tolls received 38%, and sales tax, 26%.
 - Over eight in ten respondents (85%) agreed or strongly agreed that new funding is required and an overwhelming number back dedicated revenues.
- **Forum poll** (http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/04/06/metrolinx_transit_taxes_rejected_by_66_per_cent_poll.html) for The Toronto Star (995 respondents, March 28-April 3):
 - Just one in three respondents supported Metrolinx's short-list of 11 proposed revenue tools, released in late March.
 - Parking levy, HOT lanes and development charges were supported by 47%, 43% and 42% respectively, none of the options floated by Metrolinx garnered more than 50% approval.
- **Toronto Region Board of Trade**
 - In mid-March the TBOT recommended (http://www.bot.com/AM/Template.cfm?Section=News_Releases&CONTENTID=8472&TEMPLATE=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm) that Metrolinx consider a regional sales tax, a regional fuel tax, and parking levy and HOT lanes as "balanced, fair and economically responsible." The organization said it surveyed its members but didn't release the results.
- **Spacing/EnviroNics online poll**
 - Released in April, 2012 (<http://spacing.ca/toronto/2012/04/18/spacing-enviroNics-poll-74-of-gta-support-regional-sales-tax->

[dedicated-to-transit/](#)), found 74% of GTHA residents (1,436 respondents) agreed or strongly agreed with a dedicated sales tax modeled on Los Angeles County's .5% increase approved in 2008.

- **Enviro-nics poll commissioned for Metrolinx** (2,500 respondent, September, 2011) and [obtained by The Globe and Mail](#) (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/residents-remain-skeptical-on-metrolinx-funding/article4633703/>) through an access to information request:

- 70% agreed that government has enough revenue to improve road and transit and thus doesn't need to impose additional taxes

photo by Danielle Scott (http://www.flickr.com/photos/danielle_scott/3786156377/)

* The online survey was conducted by Innovative Research Group with in partnership Spacing Magazine. Innovative Research Group interviewed 1,117 Canadian adults residing in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area between May 9th and 15th, 2013. The online sample was weighted down to 1,072 by age, gender and region using 2011 Statistics Canada Census data to reflect the actual demographic composition of the GTHA population. Since the online survey was not a random, probability based sample, a margin of error could not be calculated. The Marketing Research and Intelligence Association prohibits statements about margins of sampling error or population estimates with regard to most online panels. The margin of error for a probability-based random sample of 1,117 using a probability sample is ± 2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

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