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Opposition groups urge Mayor to rethink his transit plan overhaul

Natalie Alcoba Apr 1, 2011 4:32 PM ET | Last Updated: Apr 1, 2011 5:24 PM ET

Critics of Toronto's revamped transit plan are calling on Mayor Rob Ford to hold off until he has had a chance to gather public input.

Representatives from the Toronto Environmental Alliance, the Canadian Tamil Congress, the York Federation of Students, the Canadian Arab Federation, and Local 75 Unite Here, want Mr. Ford to "take the summer" to review a plan that will build less transit, in favour of putting most of it underground.

More than \$8-billion from the province that had been earmarked for 52 kilometres of light rail along Eglinton, Sheppard, Finch and the Scarborough RT will now go entirely to a 25-kilometre Eglinton-Scarborough-Crosstown LRT. It will run underground from Black Creek Drive to Kennedy Road, and then continue on the Scarborough RT tracks until Scarborough Centre. On Sheppard, the city is planning to use private financing to extend the subway 13 kilometres from Downsview to Yonge in the west and from Don Mills to Scarborough Centre in the East.

Here we have a Mayor elected for all Toronto but who didn't consult us, as if we have no voice at all, no feeling or really ideas," said Teferi Zemene, a Scarborough resident and member of Local 75 Unite Here. "It doesn't matter what kind of change he wants to make, he should have at least consulted the residents of the suburbs."

Jamie Kirkpatrick, transit campaigner for the Toronto Environmental Alliance, asked Mayor Ford to "take the summer" to hold public consultations on his proposed subway.

Some people actually like the idea of light rail transit down our streets because they know it's going to get buses off the road," said Mr. Kirkpatrick.

The Mayor doesn't see it that way at all, arguing that the only way to improve Toronto's clogged streets is to put tracks underground. He says last year's 10-month election campaign, during which he promised to build subways, was the equivalent of public consultation.

Giorgio Mammoliti, who represents York West, said his community had supported a Finch West LRT because a subway for the area was not on the table. Now it apparently is, after Mayor Ford said Finch could get a subway within 10 years.

What it amounts to is with an LRT you're never going to get a subway," said Councillor Mammoliti. "I would rather put my efforts into a long-term infrastructure that brings a subway through instead of putting us through what St. Clair has gone through."

None of the represented organizations that voiced opposition Friday endorsed Mayor Ford in last year's election. Local 75 Unite Here endorsed George Smitherman, while the rest didn't back any mayoral candidate. Robert Cerjanec, v.p. operations-elect for York Federation of Students said he personally supported Joe Pantalone primarily because of his support for the light rail transit network.

"This goes far beyond politics now," said Mohamed El Rashidy, director of the Canadian Arab Federation. "It's a watershed moment for Toronto. Toronto's transportation is atrocious compared to other cities that we like to compare ourselves to. It is very disappointing, and to make a plan that will not address so many needs, particularly in priority communities, is really leaving us with a bleak future."

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