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Glen Murray's high-speed rail plan is flawed

Ontario Transportation Minister Glen Murray's should drop his high-speed rail dream and commit to a conventional rail improvement plan.



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Transport Minister Glen Murray has added a Toronto-Kitchener-London high-speed rail initiative to the Liberals' pre-election plan for all-day service and electrification of the GO system, which was announced by Murray and Kathleen Wynne on April 17, 2014.

By: Greg Gormick Published on Mon Jun 02 2014

In train-poor Canada, it is inevitable that some anxious politician on the campaign trail will promise to deliver ultra-expensive high-speed rail if re-elected.

So it is in Ontario today. Even before the writ was dropped, Transportation Minister Glen Murray was coupling a Toronto-Kitchener-London high-speed rail line to his party's heavily freighted train of previous transportation promises.

Known as Moving Ontario Forward, that [pre-election plan](#) includes all-day, two-way service and electrification of the entire GO system, big-ticket subway and light rail transit projects galore and major highway improvements. This, say the Liberals, can all be done for \$15 billion within a decade — without tax increases or new user fees.

When Murray added his high-speed rail plan to his party's bulging basket of goodies, he said it wouldn't add to the cost of those previous promises. Unfortunately, he won't release the full details of his supertrain until after the election, so it's hard to determine how such a financial miracle works.

Is it any wonder Murray's dream scheme met howls of laughter within the North American rail industry? The sketchy technical and financial details provided are so flawed they would make you wonder if these folks could even run a Lionel toy train set.

The lowball price tag of \$2 billion to \$3 billion rang the alarm bells of many rail professionals. So did the suggestion that Murray's 320-km/hour electric passenger trains — 56 per day — could share a portion of the route with CN's long, heavy and numerous freight trains, which operate at a maximum of 100 km/hour. Let's not even discuss the new "greenfield" line segments that will bypass downtown Guelph, Stratford and St. Marys.

In the end, this back-of-the-napkin high-speed rail plan is so out of sync with reality that its failings don't warrant cataloguing. This train is clearly designed to carry ridings, not passengers.

But there is one productive element in Murray's plan, although it's doubtful he realizes it. Since Via Rail Canada already operates on the Toronto-Kitchener-London route, Murray thinks the feds might hop aboard his bullet train.

Great idea, except it should be the other way around. The province should be instigating a partnership deal to improve the existing Via service on this line and throughout southwestern Ontario. It shouldn't be another high-speed rail fantasy, but a rational, incremental plan using conventional trains to deliver more frequent and faster service now, not years or decades from now.

In fact, such a plan is gathering dust at Via headquarters.

When the Harper government decided to pump \$923 million in much-needed capital into Via back in 2007, their plan included a cost-effective project for southwestern Ontario. With rebuilt self-propelled passenger cars and some strategic infrastructure improvements, this would have provided six Toronto-Kitchener-London trains in each direction daily, plus a reduction in the travel time. Costing less than \$100 million, the plan was to be announced in Kitchener in November 2009.

But then Via went off the rails. The various elements of the federal rail improvement plan ran badly over schedule and budget. The southwestern Ontario plan was dumped so Via could paper over the financial damage on other projects.

No one would ever suggest a passenger service using rebuilt equipment at 160 km/hour would be the final milestone in the improvement of southwestern Ontario's abysmal rail system. But it could have been the first component of a rolling program of improvements in equipment, infrastructure, running times and frequency in a region that has traditionally used its passenger trains to a high degree.

The Via plan still makes sense. So does Murray's suggestion that rail passenger service could be improved jointly by the province and the feds.

Such co-operative funding agreements have largely fuelled the accelerating growth of Via's U.S. counterpart, Amtrak, in recent years. Today, those partnerships between the feds and 19 state governments are producing major improvements on 25 Amtrak corridors nationwide. The long-range objective is — surprise! — higher speed service. The long journey to high-speed rail has begun in the U.S. In Canada, it has not.

Should Murray be returned to Queen's Park on June 12, he would do himself and Ontarians a great service by dropping his high-speed rail fantasy and committing to a conventional, Amtrak-style rail improvement plan for southwestern Ontario. We don't need another high-speed rail dream for tomorrow. We need rational, affordable and deliverable rail service today.

Greg Gormick is a Toronto transportation writer and policy adviser. His clients have included CN, CP, VIA and numerous elected officials and government transportation agencies.