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The GTA Needs More Road Capacity: If Not Highway 413, Then Where?

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There is a growing choir of opposition to the proposed Highway 413, also known as the “GTA West Transportation Corridor” as it will eventually feature a transitway and will prioritize potential goods movement. Their bottom line is: “don't build the 413. It will impose substantial environmental costs and, besides, is not needed.”

This paper looks at the most recent research about the projected growth in automobile traffic in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to the year 2041.¹ It concludes that we need more road capacity to maintain sustainable urban life and economic activity in the region.

Let us base our decisions on future transportation investment, whether it be transit or roads, on the best research. The 2041 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP), released by Metrolinx, an agency of the Government of Ontario, and approved by its Board of Directors in 2018, is the most recent roadmap for transit planning in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA). For this research, we use the GTHA as a proxy for the GTA. Metrolinx’s research reflects an understanding of the enormous population and employment growth predicted for the GTA and the demands that it will place on the transportation system.

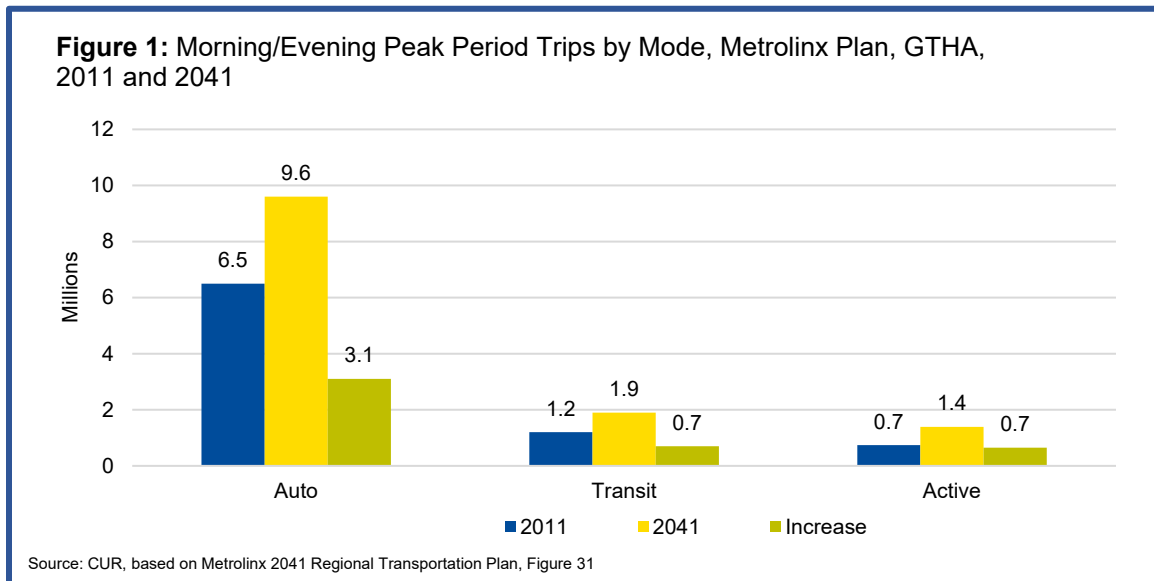
Metrolinx's RTP incorporates large-scale expansions in frequent rapid transit service and cycling routes and HOV/HOT lanes across the GTHA. The aggregate transit investment underway or planned is large. Metrolinx stated in 2018 that the province alone committed more than \$30 billion in transit funding for nine major completed projects and another \$16 billion to projects in delivery. The provincial and federal governments recently committed many more billions for new transit capacity.

Compared to its base year of 2011, where does the car fit in Metrolinx's vision of the future in 2041?

- **The forecast anticipates a sizable increase in peak-time trips by auto to 2041 and much smaller growth in transit and active trips**

Transportation engineers plan roads and transit facilities to accommodate demand at peak times when people commute to and from work. We use Metrolinx’s data to separate peak time trips into three modal categories and express each as a percentage of total trips.

Figure 1 shows the peak-time trips by three modes of travel for 2011 and 2041 and the forecast increase in trips between 2011 to 2041.



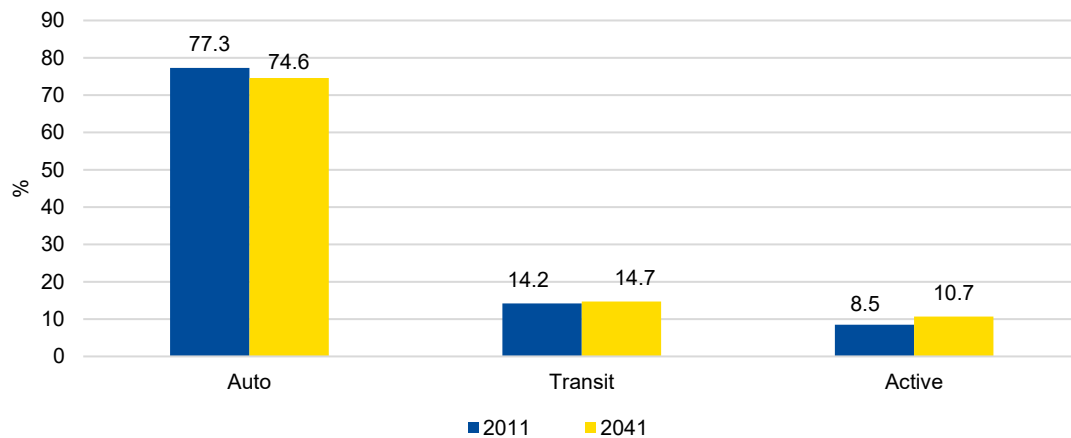
The number of expected peak-time trips by auto is projected to increase sharply to 9.6 million in 2041, up 3.1 million trips, or 48 percent, from 2011. The projected increases in transit and active trips (walking and cycling) are much smaller (each 0.7 million).

The impact of COVID-19 on (a) decentralizing housing choice and (b) longer, though less frequent, commuting for many of those relocating, is not incorporated in the Metrolinx analysis since it was completed before the pandemic. These changes would also favour increased car over transit usage for many.

- **The auto will still be the prevailing form of travel within the region in 2041**

Figure 2 shows that three-quarters of all trips in the GTHA at peak time are forecast to be by car in 2041, down only slightly from the 2011 base year proportion. Just 15% of peak-time trips will be by transit in 2041, and 11% will be active trips, up only marginally from 2011.

Figure 2: Modal Split of Peak Hour Trips, Metrolinx Plan, GTHA, 2011 and 2041



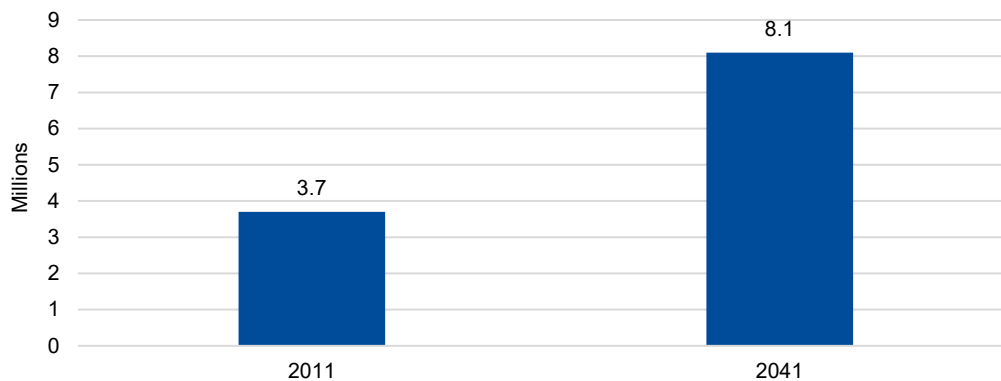
Source: CUR, based on Metrolinx 2041 Regional Transportation Plan, Figure 31

The many transit investments proposed in Metrolinx's RTP will merely maintain, not materially increase, transit's share of peak-time trips up to 2041. The growth in non-auto trips is simply keeping up with the GTA's rapid growth.

- **Driver congestion will worsen markedly**

Figure 3 shows what Metrolinx refers to as congested driving, which measures the congested vehicle kilometres travelled in the GTHA during the morning peak hour.

Figure 3: Congested Auto Driving Kilometres, GTHA, 2011 and 2041



Source: CUR, based on Metrolinx 2041 Regional Transportation Plan, Figure 31

Metrolinx expects the number of congested vehicle kilometres will more than double between 2011 and 2041, from 3.7 million to 8.1 million. If you are a driver, which includes most of us, particularly in the 905 regions, imagine the added frustrations from doubling the congestion on the current road and highway network during trips to and from work.

Bottom Line

There is no question that transportation investment in heavily populated areas of the GTA should focus on transit, if for no reason other than to catch up from the dearth of such investment dating back to the 1970s. But strategic road expansions are necessary and should be made as well. Good transportation planning accommodates trips by public transit and roads, thereby providing users transit choices.

The scale of past and future population growth, housing demand by type of unit and employment growth in the GTA is tremendous – a city the size of Kingston is being added each year to the GTA. Transit cannot handle the increased trips alone, as evidenced by Metrolinx's research for its 2041 RTP.

So, the question is: if we can't build the proposed Highway 413, where can we build the road capacity to accommodate the massive growth in car trips in the GTA as well as provide for the growing volume of truck traffic?

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¹ Please note, we use the terms auto, automobile and car interchangeably for the purpose of this paper.