

Northern Ontario transportation task force should include Sault member

A provincial Northern Ontario transportation task force doesn't include anyone from Sault Ste. Marie and city council are requesting that it does.

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After passenger rail service pulled out of Timmins 30 years ago, portions of former railway corridors were parcelled off and sold or converted into public trails while many tracks were ripped out or paved over. This is an old, disused railway corridor that cuts across the east end of Porcupine. The Daily Press SunMedia

Sault Ste. Marie's city council is urging the provincial government to appoint someone from the city on its Northern Ontario Transportation Task Force.

The resolution, moved by Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian and Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker was unanimously supported by council.

It was recently announced by the Ontario government that a task force would be established to focus on transportation needs and opportunities in the region.

But that task force doesn't include anyone from Sault Ste. Marie or the Algoma District and rail advocates have charged another study – especially one that seems to have an emphasis on roads

– is not what is needed. Instead, they argue the recommendations of former studies, including that of the Northern Ontario Multi-Modal Transportation Study, should be implemented.

The pre-2018 election study took three years to complete with a multitude of participation but has since sat on the shelf and has not seen any action, she said.

“It must be a required reading for this committee. It was not a perfect study but the groundwork has already been done,” said Lucille Frith, co-chair of the Northern Eastern Ontario Rail Network shortly after the task force members were announced. That multi-modal study was geared towards incorporating a variety of transportation modes to move freight around the province.

Rail is also a form of transportation that reduces greenhouse gases, saves roads from crumbling from heavy trucks, is a more reliable form of transportation that can be used in any weather system and has environmental benefits, rail advocates argue. It can also safely transport both freight and passengers, linking hard-to-reach communities and rural areas together, especially in Northern Ontario.

The resolution notes that Sault Ste. Marie is on an International border with access to major U.S. commercial markets. It’s also at the northern terminus of Interstate 75, a major transportation route.

Even more importantly, the city is located on a major waterway, is home to the locks and has a strong non-profit advocacy group, the Coalition For Passenger Trains, who has been lobbying for the return of passenger train service for several years.

“It’s unfortunate a resolution like this even has to be written,” Christian told city council.

He said community leaders worked hard to ensure that Huron Central Railway stayed on track to ensure freight can move through the city, something Romano had a role in shortly after he was first elected.

Not including a Sault Ste. Marie representative on the new task force is “a serious over-site by the provincial PC’s,” Christian said. “I want Ross Romano to keep fighting on our behalf.”

Mayor Christian Provenzano has been charged with writing a letter to Ontario’s Transportation Minister Caroline Mulroney requesting that a representative from Sault Ste. Marie be included on the recently announced task force.

Sault MPP Ross Romano has also been copied on the letter.

He did not respond to The Sault Star’s request for comment by deadline Wednesday.

The Ontario 2021-22 budget includes a commitment of \$641 million to expand and repair Northern highways and bridges.

Northern Ontario comprises almost 90 per cent of Ontario’s land mass, with a population of 807,000.