

SAULT STE. MARIE

THE SAULT STAR



OPINION: All Northern transportation modes need upgrade

A city council transportation resolution should have been about more than just roads, Elaine Della-Mattia notes.

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City council unanimously passed a resolution last week calling on provincial political parties to prioritize improvements to Highway 17 North.

Council wants to see a plan incorporated in each party's policy platform and have local candidates address the issue during the upcoming election campaign.

Mayor Christian Provenzano has been charged with penning council's position to local candidates running in June.

There is no doubt that strong transportation links are important to Sault Ste. Marie and the smaller surrounding communities it serves. It's important to the local and regional economy, our supply chains, tourism and so much more.

What's lacking in this resolution – and no member of council mentioned during the meeting – was that it only deals with highways, or road transportation. For instance, it doesn't make mention of the need for passenger or freight rail, another method of transportation that is vital to the economy, regional residents and tourists.

The resolution also omits any reference to another motion passed by council in February, which urged the provincial government to appoint a Sault Ste. Marie representative to its Northern Ontario Transportation Task Force. That group has been established to focus on transportation needs and opportunities in the region. Rail advocates have argued another study isn't needed, but the implementation of former studies' recommendations do need to be advanced.

There's no doubt that safe travel and safety of our roads and highways is important.

However, Northerners have yet to see the repeated call for dollars put toward passenger train service answered by the traditional federal government funders. Issues with the infrastructure of short-line rail, used by major industries across the district, also remain a concern.

If the provincial government wants to embark upon a full-fledge transportation plan for the North, then it is time to partner with the federal government to work together on these ever-important programs that are vital to the local, regional and national economy. Transportation ministries exist at both the provincial and federal levels of government. Lines of responsibility, once drawn vividly in the sand decades ago, just don't cut it to taxpayers anymore. There is only one taxpayer. Co-operation is key.

Coun. Matthew Shoemaker was correct when he pointed out Sault Ste. Marie is the urban hub for smaller communities surrounding the city and residents of those communities rely on the highway to get in and out of town to do their shopping, attend medical appointments, dine or be entertained. Some of those tasks are essential and highway closures can be difficult, and even create health or safety risks.

Perhaps it would have been more prudent for council to reiterate its February resolution and put provincial political parties' – and their Northern candidates' – feet to the fire, urging them to

develop a complete Northern Ontario transportation plan, one that includes road, rail, water, air and even active transportation methods.

With Ontario's plan to place \$82 billion in transportation improvements over the next year, that money should be spread across the province, and not just focused on the GTA.

A provincial plan should be far more sweeping. It should include climate change issues, greenhouse gas reductions, improving the economy and increasing tourism. It needs to consider connecting remote communities, winter weather and future developments, such as the Ring of Fire.

Roads alone don't check off all the boxes.

Since council passed a resolution asking to be part of the provincial government's Northern Ontario Transportation Task Force, it should continue down that same road, keeping the focus on all modes of transportation.

City council has put much work and dedication into diversifying the economy and boosting tourism. Greenhouse gas reduction and climate change are on its radar and reduction plans are in place. An Active Transportation Plan is gaining steam. All this and much more can – and should – be included in a Northern transportation plan.

The highway resolution alone may have been slightly short-sighted, but its intention to raise the bar for Northerners, and especially our region, is good.

Keeping these issues in the spotlight should urge political parties to incorporate all transportation in the platforms. Let's hope we see some clear results when those plans are unveiled over the coming months.

Elaine Della-Mattia is The Sault Star's political reporter.