

Secret draft highlights agency's strategy

Transportation agency urged to 'salt' public sessions with supporters to avoid having its plans hijacked

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FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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A confidential draft of a Metrolinx communications strategy advised the province's Toronto-area transportation agency to "salt" its public consultation sessions with supporters in order to avoid having its plans "hijacked by nimbies or local politicians on the make."

The Globe and Mail obtained most of the document through a request under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. But one paragraph from the eight-page draft strategy, drawn up in advance of Metrolinx's 25-year plan released last year, was withheld under an exemption in the act for "advice to government."

The Globe then obtained the paragraph separately. Under the heading "Consultation Process," it reads: "Our consultation period needs to be tightly structured and telescoped. The last thing we need is for this to be hijacked by nimbies or local politicians on the make. These should be mainly informational briefings. We should salt the sessions with supporters. An orgy of consultation will mire this in controversy and delay."

The revelation comes as Metrolinx faces complaints about its public consultation process on the proposed rail link from Union Station to Pearson Airport from the Weston Community Coalition, a citizens group that opposes the plans because of the increased train traffic through their community.

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But Rob MacIsaac, the president of Hamilton's Mohawk College and the chairman of Metrolinx's board of mostly local politicians, said that while he wrote much of the document the offending paragraph does not reflect his views and was written by a consultant he would not name.

"Those are not my words," Mr. MacIsaac, a former mayor of Burlington, said yesterday in an interview, stressing that the document never became official Metrolinx policy.

"The document itself was a think piece. It has no status. It never went to the board," he said. "... It's full of different thoughts, some of which I proceeded to go to the board with, others that fell by the wayside."

Of the paragraph on public consultations, he said: "It was something that I did not especially agree with - not my style, not the way in which I have ever conducted public consultations."

Mike Sullivan, the chairman of the Weston Community Coalition fighting the airport-rail link, said the language in the paragraph confirms his fears about Metrolinx.

"Whether or not they actually accepted that advice, this is how they are behaving," Mr. Sullivan said.

He said Metrolinx public consultations earlier this month in Weston were "lacking in transparency" and "misleading." And he claimed that promised accommodations for Weston, such as its own station on the rail line, might not materialize as Metrolinx pushes its version of the plans through.

Mr. MacIsaac said Mr. Sullivan's group and Weston residents would be consulted during the coming environmental assessment, but warned that public consultation will not mean doing everything opponents of the rail link want Metrolinx to do.

Much of the rest of the Metrolinx draft document, dated July 10, 2008, suggests ways to sell the controversial idea of road tolls to drivers, as the agency was openly considering tolls as a possible revenue source at the time. The idea was removed from the plans after they were vetted by Queen's Park, perhaps eliminating the need for an aggressive public-relations strategy.

The draft document also suggests Metrolinx - set up by the province in 2006 - brand public-transit projects across the greater Toronto area as its own, saying "even where projects are delivered and operated by others, it should be clear that at every stage they are 'Powered by Metrolinx'."

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