



News

Abandoned in York

NDP rides rail uproar in riding long ago forgotten by incumbent Libs

By Roger Brook

York South-Weston, perched in the nether regions of the former have-not city of York, has for as long as anybody can remember held the dubious distinction of being the second-poorest riding in the province.

[briefbreak]

The riding favoured the NDP until the fallout from Bob Rae (who represented the riding) clobbered the party.

Now Mike Sullivan, best known for leading a fight to kill a privately run rail link from Union Station to Pearson – the line is slated to cut right through Weston without stopping – is taking on long-time Liberal incumbent Alan Tonks.

Tonks, who has represented the area for the better part of the last four decades as city councillor, then mayor and Metro chair, and now as MP, has long since moved from the struggling area for “personal and family reasons,” but is quick to add that his heart’s still here.

The knock: does his job and collects a paycheque, but more is needed.

Tonks finds himself in an awkward position this time around – butting heads with his provincial colleagues on the rail line proposal known as Blue 22.

The line’s private partner, engineering firm SNC-Lavalin, is currently negotiating with the province to proceed with the project under the new expedited six-month transit EA process. Lavalin would no doubt appreciate the tighter timeline and has hired Robert Silver, an adviser to Gerard Kennedy on his national campaign and to Premier Dalton McGuinty, to lobby for a tighter timeline for the EA.

Tonks is warning fellow Ontario Liberals that proceeding under a tightened EA “would be acting in bad faith.” He has made up flyers and is mounting a letter-writing campaign.

If Tonks can’t slow down Blue 22, (until at least after the election), he can always shift the blame.

It was Tonks’s friends in the former Liberal cabinet, in particular transport minister David Collenette, who created the project and rammed it through. The sweetheart deal for Lavalin came with strings for the community; a \$20 one-way fare, no stops and the division of Weston.

Tonks was briefed on the proposal back in 2000, but kept mum.

“I honestly think I come to this with clean hands,” he says.

Proponents of PPPs claim that private companies provide upfront financing, absorb project risks and increase competition, resulting in lower costs.

But the promises often ring hollow. Lavalin was the sole bidder for the Blue22 competition. The government will be dropping \$200 to \$300 million in subsidies. Lavalin’s contribution is four rehabbed 50-year-old diesel trains and a short rail spur, but it gets to keep the profits.

Lavalin can raise prices or even lease the tracks, which will be owned by CN, then leased to GO, which in turn will lease them to Lavalin for a buck a year for 53 years.

High fares and a lack of stops ensure that the hundreds of thousands of people in northwest Toronto and even the 70,000 workers at Pearson are left out of the picture. Would someone making \$12 an hour (\$96 per shift) pay \$40 (plus TTC) to get to and from work?

Mike Sullivan, whose local activism began five years ago when he saw a newspaper announcement for a proposed rail link, is carrying the NDP’s hopes this time in York South-Weston.

He says Blue22 as currently envisioned will block the four roads that cross the tracks, connecting the shops on Weston Road to homes on the other side. He argues this would kill the community.

Sullivan formed the Weston Community Coalition (WCC), which helped organize thousands of active residents, effectively forcing officials to put the project on hold. He wants the cash for the project reallocated to affordable public transit.

The province is now hinting broadly about a local station.

Sullivan explains that while government wouldn’t respond to community questions, it’s been in ongoing private negotiations with SNC-Lavalin. You can’t help wondering if the community would get more respect if (like Lavalin) it was one of the top contributors to the provincial and federal Liberals.

Sullivan feels particularly betrayed by Liberal MPP Laura Albanese, who repeatedly promised to kill Blue22 but, once elected in 2007, qualified her position by saying she only opposed the line if it didn’t stop in Weston.

On the other side of the riding, meanwhile, Sullivan has uncovered some more dirt: plans by Metrus Properties to use 50 acres of polluted land formerly occupied by Kodak in hard-hit Mount Dennis for big-box retail.

Sullivan wants high-paying green jobs on the site. He says he’d search out partners like Toronto’s high-rise green retrofit program. He knows attracting industry and training workers will require some start-up funds, but says MPs often do this for their ridings. The feds currently dole out funds to dirty industries like Ford and the Alberta oil patch, so why not for sustainable industry?

“The site is big, surrounded by railways, highways and a community that’s saying yes to industry!” he enthuses. Conservative candidate Aydin Cocelli thinks box stores are appropriate, and he’s more focused on crime.

“The latest crime wave has to stop. Weston has a bad name,” he says. “Other places have nice houses. Here we have variety stores and bars, nothing else.”

Tonks says the Liberals’ Green Shift and the 30-50 poverty reduction plans would encourage green development on the site.

Green candidate Andre Papadimitriou suggests targeted tax credits to stimulate green industry.

I head out to follow Sullivan and others door-knocking at a TCHC seniors home at 600 Silverthorn in the southern part of the riding.

Residents there complain about pensions and rising costs. One shows me that his diabetes monitor indicates trouble but he doesn’t have the money to take a bus to the doctor. I give him a couple of dollars.

While few recognize Sullivan, many like the NDP's work on health care or recognize Jack Layton's picture on the flyer. But most are suspicious of politicians.

Sullivan is friendly and has a sense of humour and manages to cheerfully disagree when one woman suggests bringing back hangings.

Another praises Mike Harris.

Looks like the NDP's in for another wild ride in York South-Weston.

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