

Working Together to Tackle Congestion

AMO SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON HERITAGE,
INFRASTRUCTURE AND CULTURAL POLICY ON BILL 212, *REDUCING GRIDLOCK,
SAVING YOU TIME ACT, 2024*

November 15, 2024

Executive Summary

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) is pleased to provide comments on Bill 212, *Reducing Gridlock, Saving You Time Act*. Municipalities are committed to working with the Province to offer transportation infrastructure that can improve the quality of life for Ontarians.

AMO recognizes that the changes proposed are aimed at improving congestion and the quality of life for Ontarians. While we strongly support the intent behind these changes, we disagree with way the Province is choosing to approach this – in particular the new proposed framework on bike lanes.

Tackling a complex issue such as congestion will not be solved by this proposal, and it points to a need for a serious conversation on updating the provincial-municipal relationship. Municipalities and the provincial government need to discuss a new fiscal framework to support sustainability, affordability, and economic prosperity – including a focus on how we can work together to improve long-term transportation infrastructure to lift the quality of life for Ontarians.

Abandon the bike lane framework proposal

The proposed bike lane framework is a very troubling overreach into municipal planning. Based on local knowledge and community input, municipalities develop transportation plans that balance traffic flow with planning priorities like active transportation, multimodal transportation, and environmental and health protection. Bicycle lanes are an essential element of urban transportation planning and road safety. They offer a healthy mode of transportation that can remove cars from the road, especially for local trips or for last and first miles of connecting to transit – combating congestion and climate change, while also protecting the safety of bike riders, drivers, and pedestrians.

Unlike the proposed broadband changes which reflect ongoing dialogue and municipal input to help implement a common goal of broadband across the province by 2025, AMO is not aware of any consultation with municipalities regarding bicycle lanes or of the balanced evidence the Province considered in its decision to address congestion.

It is also unclear how the Ministry of Transportation will be in a better position than municipalities to make decisions about local transportation matters. The provincial government remains best suited to address large-scale infrastructure projects that link communities, such as expanding the GO service, managing significant capital transit initiatives, and overseeing Ontario's highways.

Rather than spending tax dollars on micromanaging bike lanes, the Province could focus resources on accelerating its own approval processes for transit projects that can have much higher impacts on congestion in urban settings. The Province has already shown leadership on taking on major urban transit projects such as the Eglinton LRT, expected to carry approximately 5,500 passengers per hour during peak travel times, and the Ontario Line which could see 28,000 fewer cars on the road each day once operational that collectively will have significant impacts on congestion. The Province should focus on making sure these projects meet timelines so that those positive impacts are realized as quickly as possible.

When we work together from our respective lanes of expertise, we can come up with optimal solutions for congestion that strike the right mix of infrastructure to support safe local trips within communities, and diverse transit or highways for travelling between communities. This proposal blurs those lines of expertise, and actually creates additional red-tape, cost, and delays to planning and implementing infrastructure. There have been recent examples of unintended consequences when the Province has tried to take over local decision-making without engagement. To the Province's credit some of these have been walked back or refined, such as changes to the Development Charges from Bill 23 or developing a framework for Minister Zoning Orders.

But that work comes with an opportunity cost in both resources and time. The Province can avoid repeating this costly mistake now by repealing this section of the Bill and instead focus on collaborating with municipalities on planning and building high-impact solutions to congestion that can lift Ontarians quality of life while also supporting economic prosperity.

Work with municipalities to support fair funding for transit and road infrastructure

Research shows that building or expanding roads creates induced demand – meaning it results in more cars using expanded roads with little to no impact on congestion. Instead of focusing on reducing or removing bike lanes and expanding roads in urban centres, the Province should focus on continuing to make key investments in local transit and road infrastructure.

Public transit ridership is back to pre-pandemic levels or higher in most Ontario jurisdictions. However, the fiscal situation facing Ontario's transit agencies can be challenged with significant capital and operating deficits, which are already resulting in costly fare increases and service reductions. Ensuring funding for sustainable, high-quality transit offers alternative transportation options that can reduce car traffic, alleviate congestion, and support the development of transit-oriented communities with community housing potential.

At the same time, road infrastructure across Ontario needs to be addressed. Congestion can happen in different areas for different reasons. In communities with more space, it can be due to not having road expansions that have kept up with growth or when roads are not well maintained (e.g., potholes slowing cars). In larger denser cities where there is less space for cars it is often due to not having a good mix of transportation and transit options that have kept up with growth over time – bike lanes included. In essence, it is a symptom of underfunding in costly infrastructure which municipalities are not equipped to fund alone.

The government has shown signs of moving in the right direction with recent growth infrastructure funding for transportation through the Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program, doubling the Ontario Community Infrastructure Fund to 2026 and potential new support for pothole prevention. This is a start and a better use of taxpayer money – leaving decisions about local transportation planning in the hands of local municipal planners and decision makers.

This points to a need for a serious conversation on updating the provincial-municipal fiscal framework to support sustainability, affordability, and economic prosperity – including how transportation infrastructure can be sustainably funded to improve a rich network of roads, bike lanes, sidewalks, and transit that will lift the quality of life for Ontarians in all municipalities.

Conclusion

We are disappointed to see a proposal on a bike lane framework that does not address congestion, adds more time and costs to municipalities and, at worst, creates safety risks for drivers and bikers. We strongly recommend the Province abandon the proposed bike lane framework and work with AMO and municipalities on a Social and Economic Prosperity Review that includes sustainable funding for infrastructure.