

Paying for our highways

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, in the midst of the 'war to end all wars,' the Ontario government finally recognized the need to do something about the province's roads.

The decision was to embark on a program to devise a system of provincial highways and county roads that would see dirt roads covered by a layer of gravel and in some cases given a layer of macadam or asphalt.

The first provincial highway, numbered No. 2, ran east-west, eventually being supplanted by Highway 401. By 1920, several other routes were added, among them Highways 9 and 10 locally.

At the outset, the costs associated with both road-building and maintenance were shared. A 1917 delegation from Peel, Dufferin, Grey and Simcoe that met with the deputy minister of highways was told that the Province planned to pay 70 per cent of the cost of the roads designated provincial highways and 60 per cent of any route designated a county road.

That to us was a clear acknowledgment of the fact it would be unfair to expect to finance provincial highways and county roads exclusively from property taxes.

At some point, the Province switched to a system of paying the full cost of provincial highways while sharing the cost of 'connecting links' through urban areas and paying grants toward the cost of county and municipal roads.

That arrangement continued until the Mike Harris government in the late 1990s dumped nearly 5,000 kilometres of provincial highways on the shoulders of property taxpayers as a means of balancing the provincial budget.

The arbitrary downloading, on the false premise that all 5,000 km were roads 'primarily for local use,' led to the absurdity of interrupted highways, among them Highway 9 between Orangeville and Harriston. (For a reason never explained, the road continues to this day as a provincial highway between Harriston and Kincardine.)

As usually is the case, the only municipality not affected significantly was Toronto, which took over maintenance of about eight kilometres of the Queen Elizabeth Way but not the collector lanes of the Toronto Bypass, which clearly fit the description of 'primarily for local use.'

As a result of the downloading, which to their disgrace has been maintained by the Queen's Park Liberals, property owners in Dufferin are having to pay the full cost of maintaining more than 300 kilometres of county roads, including three highways 'airport Road (County 18) and County 109 and 124, formerly Highways 9 and 24' that are trunk highways carrying up to 14,000 vehicles daily, only a small portion of which could fit the definition of 'local'.

Surely the time has come for a meaningful reform of this discriminatory form of financing.

As we see it, the cost of building and maintaining both provincial and county or regional highways should be recovered from users, not property owners, by giving the counties and regions roughly half the revenue from gasoline and diesel fuel taxes.

Beyond that, we think the Province should restore most of the downloaded highways, if only as a means of promoting tourism, and return to sharing the costs for both ordinary provincial highways (all but the 400 series) and county or regional roads. Ideally, maintenance of all but the 400 series roads should be done by the counties.

In our view, property taxes should continue to support only purely local needs 'the streets in Ontario's urban centres and the municipal roadways in townships and rural portions of towns like Caledon, Mono and Grand Valley.

It would be interesting, indeed, to see how much relief such a sensible approach to financing highways would provide to local property taxpayers.