

## **A MUSKOKA OPINION: WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?**

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WHAT DOES THE NOMTS (Northern Ontario Multi Modal Transportation Strategy) REPORT MEAN TO MUSKOKA RESIDENTS, BUSINESSES AND VISITORS? (answer at end of story)

I live in Muskoka but do I live in the 'North'? Ask Muskokans if they live in the 'North' and I'll bet the majority would answer yes. And to understand how we need to move forward to reinstate passenger rail in Muskoka, we need to understand what the 'NORTH' is.

Are we in 'the north'? Well regardless of what we in Muskoka think - the government of Ontario isn't sure – Parry Sound is in the North – Norm Miller's riding is Parry Sound-Muskoka as is Tony Clement's riding. But Tony's riding includes Muskoka when it comes to funding from FEDNOR\* and NOHFC\*\*. The Ontario Tourism District RTO 12 includes Muskoka, Parry Sound and Algonquin Park Region. The park is actually in the unorganized south part of Nipissing District and not part of RTO 13AB&C which includes Northern Ontario. The Growth Plan for Northern Ontario and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation define Northern Ontario as all areas north of, and including, the districts of Parry Sound and Nipissing for political purposes, while the federal government, but not the provincial, also includes the district of Muskoka. Are you confused yet?

The provincial electoral district includes Parry Sound – Muskoka. Does Norm split his vote for MNDM projects when ½ of his district is not included in Northern Ontario? 10% of MPPs in Ontario are responsible for 90% of the geography (NORTH) and 90% of MPPs manage 10% of the geography (SOUTH). Interesting? Everything north of Severn Bridge (where the Canadian Shield begins) faces unique challenges (think rocks, trees and water and no grid roads), which require a different approach from the rest of the province. That also means that those 90% of MPPs are quite possibly unaware of the unique challenges requiring a different approach from their small jurisdictions.

Soon the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines will release the \$2.2 million multi-modal transportation strategy (NOMTS) report. This report, a 25-year study/plan for transportation modes, includes Parry Sound but not Muskoka as part of Northern Ontario's study area. So where does that leave Muskoka – especially when discussing passenger rail service. Both Tony and Norm should be helping their constituents get connected by rail to Southern Ontario. Remember that the majority of the old Northlander's passengers got on or off between Toronto and North Bay, basically Gravenhurst, Bracebridge and Huntsville stations. The GO line through Richmond Hill is the old 'Northlander' line so what would it take to make commuting by rail to Muskoka a reality - **POLITICAL WILL** – both provincially and federally. The Government of Ontario would need to mandate the service and the Government of Canada would need to reinstate their financial support (was \$2.5 M in 2011) to rent the CN track from Toronto to North Bay as ONTC\*\*\* owns only the track north of North Bay.

The NOMTS report, following direction of the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario (March 3, 2011) is to develop a long-term strategy to create a more integrated transportation infrastructure system for air, rail, road and water. And part of that plan – was to create a **(5.3) A Multi-modal Transportation system** – “The *transportation system* within Northern Ontario will be planned and managed with an emphasis on opportunities to a) optimize the capacity, efficiency and safety of the **existing transportation system**”. Well, well. The existing system in 2011 was the old 'Northlander' train and the NOMTS study did not really discuss passenger rail in Northern Ontario! So much for what is written in reports?

All rail lines in Ontario connecting east, north, south and west come through Muskoka so the outcome of the NOMTS report will impact Muskoka, whether we were included in the discussions or not!

**If** Northern Ontario is mandated to provide passenger rail service, Muskoka will benefit.

**If not**, Muskoka will be on their own to approach another carrier (Metrolinx, VIA or private provider) with a solid business plan for passenger rail service, showcasing the same opportunities southern Ontario already enjoys in government invested public transportation (think Metrolinx, GO, VIA).

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\*Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation

\*\*Federal EDC for Northern Ontario

\*\*\*Ontario Northland Transportation Corporation