

## Minister Jumps On 'H2O Highway' Ferry Suggestion

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A commuter ferry from Hamilton to Toronto is getting closer to having sea legs.

Ontario's transportation minister Donna Cansfield put the old idea back into play this week when she suggested GO Transit should explore a ferry to help relieve road and rail traffic.

"I think it's really worth investigating," she said yesterday in an interview with The Spectator. "You should put everything on the table."

Lake Ontario is underutilized as an "H2O highway" and has the potential to ship goods to the Hamilton airport, along with commuters, she said.

The Hamilton Port Authority is keen to explore the idea, too -- as long as it's accompanied by a strong business case.

"It's a question of economics," said Bob Matthews, vice-president of marketing. "I think we have to look at it with an open mind."

Three years ago, Matthews met with a visiting British colleague to discuss if a hovercraft service he ran overseas would work here. After a 40-minute boat trip from Hamilton to Toronto and a much longer drive back, they agreed the ferry would be viable.

"Gridlock is not going to get any easier," he said, noting the ferry might just be a matter of time.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger, a longtime advocate for the H2O highway, is also keen on investigating a ferry plan -- a message he conveyed to Cansfield in a meeting last winter.

The port authority has pegged Fisherman's Pier or Pier 8 as a possible location for a ferry dock. If the service was subsidized like other public transit, it could be just as affordable as the GO train, said Matthews.

Modern technology also means the boats could run all year long, said Ian Taylor, president of Reflex Advanced Marine, a Dundas company that designs fast ferries. He's met with Cansfield twice in recent months to pitch the ferry and is thrilled with her public support for exploring the idea. It's the first time a minister has supported the idea that's been kicking around for decades.

"This is groundbreaking," he said.

But any ferry proposal has a lot of ground to cover before hitting water. GO Transit and the Greater Toronto Transportation Authority are both focused on improving rail lines along the lakeshore. More trips and the prospect of electrifying the rails in the future is expected to make the service more user-friendly and boost ridership.

Ferries are typically used to transport people from one land mass to another, not run parallel to road and rail, noted GO general manager Gary McNeil. Plus, he said, land transportation typically offers higher capacity or "more bang for your buck."

A train can hold up to 2,000 people and stops quickly at stations along the route. A ferry, by contrast, would be a few hundred people. Still, McNeil thinks the ferry option should be considered by the GTTA as Ontario plans for the future.

Rob MacIsaac, chair of the GTTA, agrees, but notes the top priority right now is adding train services and bringing transit to underserved areas. Still Cansfield says she's eager to work with Hamilton and Toronto to champion the ferry idea.

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