

Niagara Escarpment Commission

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Commission de l'escarpement du Niagara

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Niagara Escarpment Commission
An agency of the Government of Ontario

5.10(b)

October 23, 2013

Mr. John Slobodzian
Project Co-ordinator
Ontario Ministry of Transportation
Provincial Planning Office
301 St. Paul Street,
2nd Floor
St. Catharines, ON L2R 7R4

- and to -

Mr. Paul Hudspith, P. Eng.
Consultant Project Manager
URS Canada Inc.
30 Leek Crescent,
4th Floor
Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4N4

Dear Sirs:

**Re: Niagara to GTA Corridor Planning and Environmental Assessment Study
Final Transportation Development Strategy**

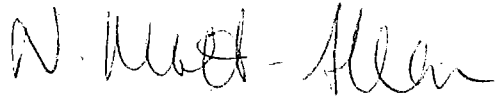
At their meeting on October 17, 2013, the Niagara Escarpment Commission considered the attached staff report and passed a resolution to bring the following additional comments to your attention.

1. That the first recommendation from the staff report be changed to read: "that the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) receive this staff report and direct staff to send the report to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, the Consultant Project Manager and the municipalities within the study area".
2. That with respect to Appendix 3 of the staff report, the NEC does not accept any analysis that rates a new crossing of the Niagara Escarpment as anything other than extremely poor and that to conclude otherwise casts doubt on the overall natural heritage analysis in the Final Transportation Development Strategy.
3. That the NEC has serious concerns about increased demand for road crossings of the Niagara Escarpment even if the various proposed highway widenings take place. The extension of urban infrastructure into the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area if the Queen Elizabeth Way is widened is particularly problematic. Niagara Region is focussing development in the southern part of its jurisdiction and widening the QEW would bring demands to the north. Instead, the focus should be on transportation network optimization and transportation demand

management to reduce or eliminate the pressure for Escarpment crossings and highway widenings although the NEC notes that optimization of the existing network alone will not solve the existing and future traffic issues.

We trust that these comments are of assistance. Please contact us if you have any questions in this regard.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "N. Mott-Allen".

Nancy Mott-Allen, MCIP, RPP
Senior Strategic Advisor

Encl.

cc. Municipalities in the Study Area

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October 17, 2013

N.E.C. DECISION

OCT 17 2013

STAFF REPORT

**RE: Niagara to GTA Corridor Planning and Environmental Assessment Study – Phase 1
Final Transportation Development Strategy**

Recommendation:

1. That the Niagara Escarpment Commission endorse this staff report and direct staff to send the report to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, the Consultant Project Manager and the municipalities within the study area.
2. That the Niagara Escarpment Commission continue to support transportation alternatives that do not involve new crossings of the Escarpment.
3. That the Niagara Escarpment Commission request to be consulted on the Terms of Reference for the future study in Phase 2 and any individual Environmental Assessments for transportation projects identified in the Final Transportation Development Strategy that are proposed within the Niagara Escarpment Plan Area.

Background:

Staff of the Niagara Escarpment Commission (NEC) has reported previously to the Commission regarding the Planning and Environmental Assessment Study which was initiated by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation (MTO) "in support of the transportation objectives of the provincial *Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe*"¹.

Staff last reported to the NEC in February 2013 when the preferred options for transportation improvements were made available noting that the Commission's position has been to support options for highway network optimisation and new or improved non-road infrastructure rather than any new Escarpment highway crossing. Representatives of the MTO gave a presentation at the April 2013 Commission meeting.

Purpose:

The Final Transportation Development Strategy has now been released with a comment deadline of November 4, 2013. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the final study recommendations for transportation and transit improvements and to discuss next steps.

Discussion:

The Niagara to Greater Toronto Area (NGTA) Transportation Study began in 2008 in order to address existing transportation issues and those that may emerge from the population and

¹ Ministry of Transportation. "Ontario Government Notice, Final Transportation Development Strategy". September 4, 2013.

employment growth predicted by the Growth Plan (2006). By 2031, population in the Study Area is predicted to increase by 45% and employment by 55%.²

The Study examined key transportation planning issues such as:

- Lack of highway capacity to handle growth;
- Need for improved connections between travel modes; and
- Road congestion during peak periods and tourism season.

The first phase of the project is now complete. The Final Strategy released in September 2013 is 360 pages in length and goes into considerable detail to present all the options and the implications of each type of transportation system improvement including economic, social, cultural and environmental factors. The report acknowledges the significance of the Niagara Escarpment and the unique policy environment that applies to it in stating that "...NEP policies will impact where and how new transportation facilities are built to meet the increase in transportation demand in the area".³

The recommended options for dealing with the immediate transportation planning issues continue to include:

- a) optimizing the existing highway network through measures such as adjustable speed limits, grade separations for railways, improved real time traffic information, traffic lanes that can be reversed during peak periods to provide additional capacity for the predominant flow of traffic, ride sharing, integrated transit fares, HOV lanes, incident (accident) management and,
- b) undertaking transit improvements such as more frequent service, new routes, improved transit connections, more transit options for tourists, particularly in the Niagara Region.

The report is optimistic that improvements can be achieved, to the extent possible, through planning which has "...due regard to the requirements of approved environmental protection policies..." when considering alternatives.⁴

In addition, a third option, highway expansions is recommended in certain areas to address the lack of capacity for passenger vehicles and trucks, lack of alternate routes during accidents and road closures or construction, delays and congestion. Exhibit 6-15 from the Final Transportation Strategy, Final Strategy Recommendations, shows the proposed highway widenings. There would be implications for lands within the NEP in the area west of Milton if an additional 4 lanes were constructed on Highway 401 (Attachment 1, Final Strategy, p. 335). Lands on either side of the highway in this location are designated as Escarpment Natural, Escarpment Protection, Escarpment Rural and Mineral Resource Extraction Areas. There would also be implications for lands in the Ancaster area as result of the proposed widening of Highway 403 by 2 lanes where lands are designated Escarpment Natural and Urban Area. Individual environmental assessments would be required for these projects and NEC staff would have the opportunity to comment on any environmental implications arising from these projects.

² Ministry of Transportation, URS Canada Inc., "Niagara to GTA Corridor, Planning and Environmental Assessment Study – Phase 1". Richmond Hill. September 2013. p. 21.

³ Ibid. p.10.

⁴ Ibid. p.24.

Lastly, the Final Transportation Strategy concludes that even if all of the above recommendations, optimizing the network, transit improvements and highway widening were to take place, there would still be lack of transportation capacity in the region as it is predicted that the predominant mode of travel will continue to be road and highway based. In light of this, the report examined numerous options for new highways which are discussed further below.

The need for further study arises in part due to the often significant potential environmental impacts that could arise from some of the proposed new road or highway options. Several of the options that were evaluated were discussed in the February 2013 staff report and presented to the Commission by the NGTA team in April 2013. The Final Transportation Strategy makes it clear that at some point in the future, difficult choices will have to be made balancing the need to protect natural heritage with the need to provide additional transportation capacity to address current projections on future population and employment growth and the NEC will need to stay engaged and involved on these matters.

The future alternatives identified on page 30 of the report are:

- a new corridor connecting QEW in the Fort Erie/Niagara Falls area to Highway 403, Highway 401 or 407 ETR, and
- a combination of new and existing corridors to provide a bypass around the urban core of Hamilton together with an upgrade or widening of Highway 406 connecting to a new corridor between Highway 406 and QEW south of Niagara Falls.

These alternatives are thoroughly evaluated in the Final Transportation Strategy Report and the following preferred options preferred options are identified:

- Central Area (Hamilton to St. Catherines): widen QEW to 8 lanes including HOV lanes within the existing right of way outside the NEP; future option could be either a new corridor or additional widening to 10 lanes,
- East Area (St. Catherines southeast to Fort Erie): new corridor connecting Highway 406 to the QEW with a long term recommendation for a new 4-lane highway from the QEW to Fort Erie south of Welland (outside NEP), and
- West Area (Hamilton/Halton); medium term improvements for widening of Highways 403, 407, 6 and the QEW (largely outside the NEP).

The authors of the Strategy recommend that future study is necessary to develop a long term approach to addressing the challenges in the transportation system in the West Area. As outlined in the presentation to the Commission in April, 3 options have been carried forward for consideration.

These are:

- Option 1 - Widening Highway 403 from the Freeman Interchange to Lincoln Alexander Parkway (no new road corridor),
- Option 4 – New Highway connecting Highway 403 to Highway 401 near the Halton/Wellington border (no new Escarpment crossing), and
- Option 6 – New highway connecting Highway 403 to 407 ETR near Dundas Street which would necessitate a new crossing of the Escarpment.

(See Attachment 2a, b and c, excerpt from NGTA presentation, April 2013)

The evaluation criteria for these options are shown in Attachment 3 (NGTA Final Strategy, p. 284) to this report and it demonstrates how a particular route option can rate highly based on one criterion but very poorly on another, hence the need for future study as no route comes out as a clearly favoured alternative.

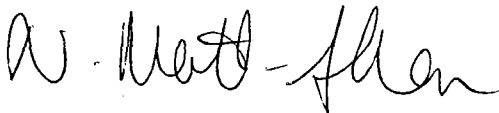
The scope of the future study could involve a longer time horizon (beyond 2031), a larger study area and consideration of the impacts of increased mode shift (from road-based to other modes of travel). The scope of the future study will be developed in consultation with stakeholders and municipalities and the NEC should request to be included in such consultation.

With respect to environmental constraint areas, including lands in the NEP, the report acknowledges that at some point it may come to clearly identifying the sensitive features and opportunities to mitigate the impact rather than being able to avoid those lands altogether. A concluding section of the report provides some limited examples of mitigation including road underpasses for wildlife, rural cross sections for some roads and even below grade highways as possible considerations.

Conclusion:

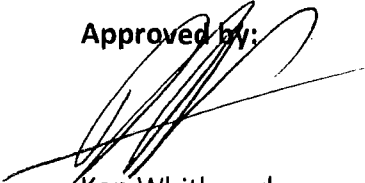
The NEC will need to remain involved in the consultation with respect to Phase 2 of the Study which will involve further examination of proposed new highways and the individual Class Environmental Assessments for road improvements for projects within the NEP Area. Staff propose that the NEC endorse the conclusion in this report respecting the recommendations proposed.

Prepared by:



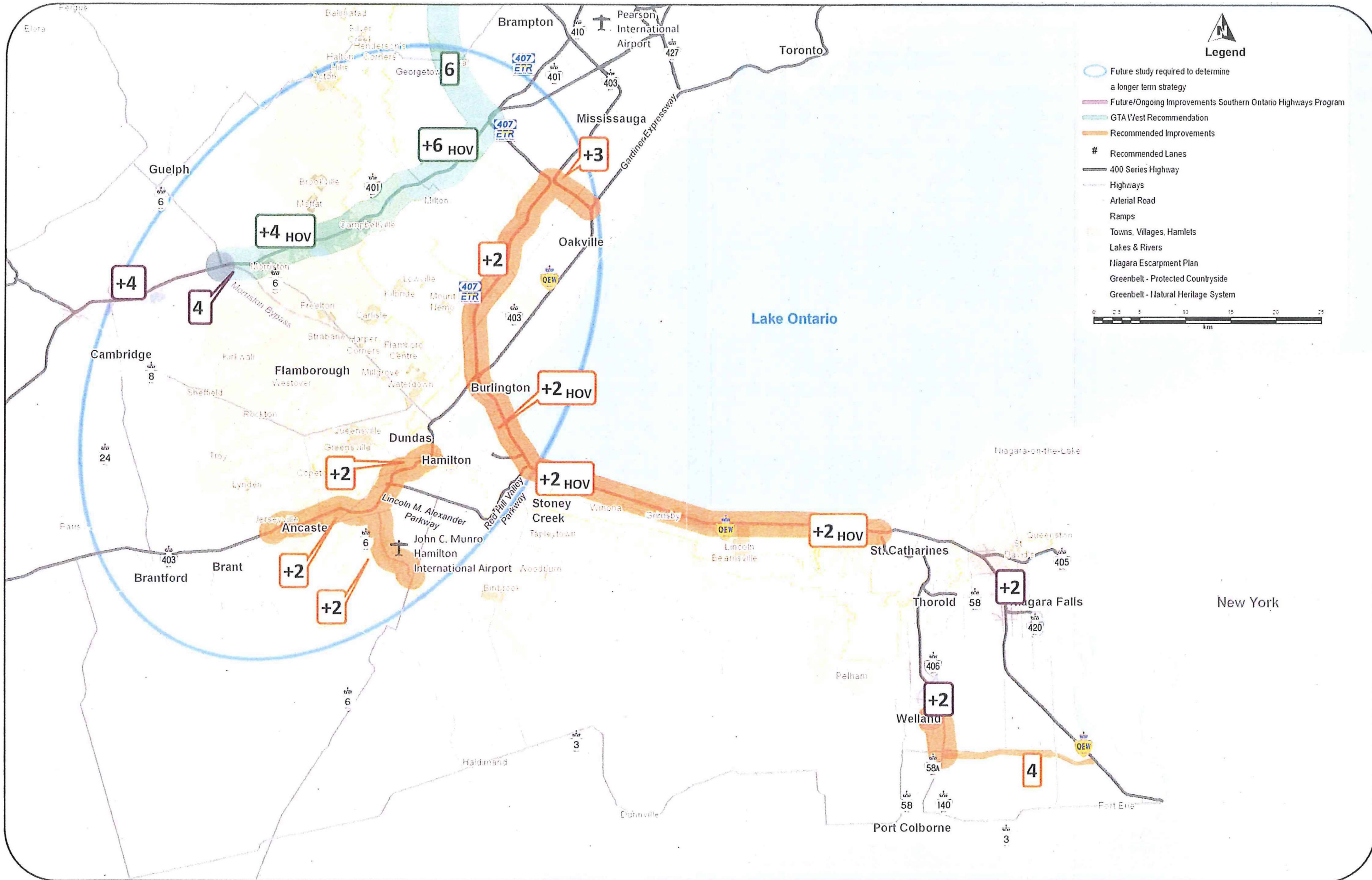
Nancy Mott-Allen, MCIP, RPP
Senior Strategic Advisor

Approved by:



Ken Whitbread
Manager

Exhibit 6-15: Final Strategy Recommendations for West, Central, and East Areas

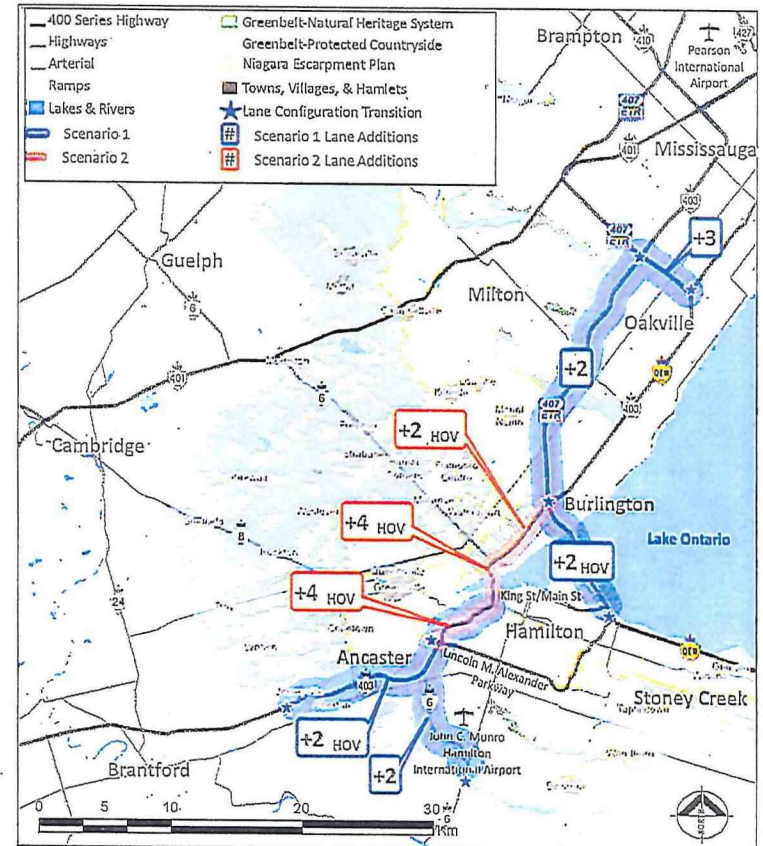


- **West Option #1** (Conventional Widening of Hwy 403 from the Freeman Interchange to Lincoln Alexander Parkway)

- Addresses some of transportation problems to 2031:
 - Highway 403 through Hamilton
- Only incremental environmental impacts
- Builds upon existing infrastructure
- No impacts to rural community character and prime agricultural lands
- No new corridor in Greenbelt

BUT...

- Not a long-term vision
- Major constructability issues
- Major social impacts
- Impacts to Hamilton Economy during construction

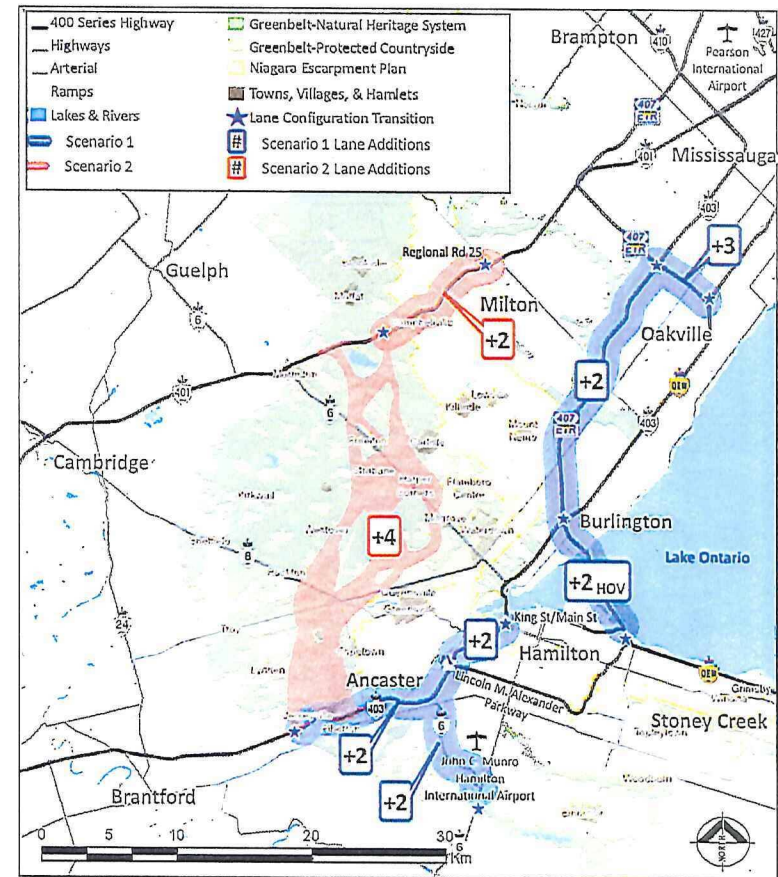


- **West Option #4** (New Highway Connecting Hwy 403 to Hwy 401 Near Wellington County/Halton Boundary)

- Provides greatest relief to key transportation problem areas:
 - Relieves congestion on Hwy 403/Hamilton, QEW/Halton, QEW/Burlington Skyway
- Provides strong support to GTA economy
- Does not require a new crossing of the Niagara Escarpment in Burlington

BUT...

- High risk of non-mitigatable impacts to large and significant natural features with strong inter-connectivity and important ecological functions
- New corridor entirely in the Greenbelt
- Significant impacts to prime agricultural lands and rural community character



- **West Option # 6** (New Highway Connecting Hwy 403 to 407 ETR Near Regional Road 5/Dundas Street)

- Adequately addresses major transportation problem areas:
 - Some congestion relief to Hwy 403/Hamilton, QEW/Burlington Skyway, QEW/Halton
- Greater opportunities for reducing impacts to natural features as compared to Option # 4 (Hwy 403 to Hwy 401)
- Much lower community impacts than Option #1 (widening Hwy 403)
- Provides strong support to GTA economy

BUT...

- New crossing of Niagara Escarpment
- New corridor entirely within the Greenbelt
- Highest impact to prime agricultural lands
- Not possible to avoid all potential impacts to significant natural features
- Significant impacts to rural community character

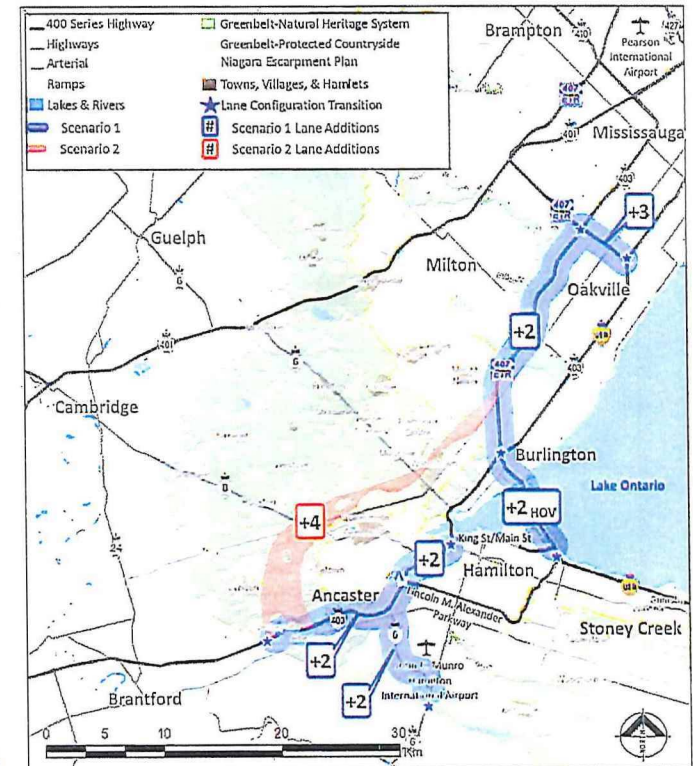


Exhibit 5-24: Summary of Detailed West Area Assessment

Alternatives	Factors							
	Transportation	Natural	Agriculture	Socio-Economic / Land Use	Cultural	Greenbelt / NEP	Economy	Cost / Constructability
West Option 1 (Hwy 403 Widening)								
West Option 4 (Hwy 403 to Hwy 401 near Halton)								
West Option 6 (Hwy 403 to 407 ETR)								

