



Transit advocate enters mayoral race

by Neil Sharma 03 Aug 2018

Toronto's municipal election got a jolt of excitement when Jennifer Keesmaat tossed her hat into the ring last Friday, and given her reputation as a staunch proponent of transit infrastructure—including the downtown relief line—the real estate industry is hopeful that she'll bring change should she win the Oct. 22 election.

“Certainly her position on transit and the relief line—the relief line is critical, there's no question about that, because it's long overdue—she could bring a positive element to the debate insofar as integrating transit and planning together in a way that's not been done before,” said **Richard Lyall, the Residential Construction Council of Ontario's president.**

“I would also hope that she brings something to the table in terms of supply chain issues with respect to housing and development, and streamlining that.”

While Keesmaat's platform is unclear, earlier this year she became CEO of Creative Housing Society, a non-profit group dedicated to building affordable housing.

Thirteen years ago, the province enacted the Places to Grow Act, mandating intensification in select hubs throughout Ontario. However, Lyall is critical of its execution because too many integral parts remain independent of each other.

“There have been significant problems to the growth plan,” he said. “We came up with the Greenbelt, municipal official plans, and everything dragged on. Effectively, we had a mandate from on high to intensify, but the capability to intensify was still left to the existing systems, such as site plan control and antiquated zoning, main streets and avenues, and lack of effective change that would facilitate mid-rise housing and more housing. Since the growth plan came into effect in Toronto, it's taken longer to get things done and approved.”

Transit development is crucial to the success of intensification. However, Toronto seems stuck in analysis paralysis. Keesmaat will always be remembered for publicly excoriating the Scarborough subway plan, much to the chagrin of Mayor John Tory, and helped scale back the infrastructure project.

“We need to make tough decisions to create housing and prioritize transit like the relief line, which should be the number one priority given the pressure on the Yonge line,” said Lyall.

“Even if it were given the green light, you’d have it partially completed by 2031. We’re almost at a situation now where people are falling off the platforms on the Yonge line.”

Better transit could be the best thing to happen to Toronto real estate in a long time. Not only will valuations ameliorate, homebuyers generally prefer living around transit hubs.

“People don’t need cars,” said Debra Bain, president of REMAX Hallmark Group of Companies. “We’ve got, like, two subway lines—that’s it. It’s a joke. Go to Paris, go to London or any of these large metropolises around the world and look at their transit systems.”

Like Keesmaat and Lyall, Bain believes the downtown relief line should be prioritized. It will also have the added boon of reducing congestion in Toronto—which, according to a Toronto Region Board of Trade estimate, costs the city \$6bln annually in lost productivity, and which will rise to \$15bln by 2031.

“We need the downtown relief line,” said Bain. “If you think it will take half an hour to get some place with the distance, add on an hour—that’s how bad it is. The city has outgrown the system we have and it hasn’t caught up. We have over 6 million people and very little transit. You’ll quite often see agents who are looking for their buyers, and it will always be along a subway line.”