



TORONTO  
REGION  
BOARD OF TRADE



BREAKING GRIDLOCK

# Finishing the Job through Provincial Action

MARCH 2026



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# The Economic Imperative of Solving Congestion

In February 2025, the Toronto Region Board of Trade (the Board) released a business-led, evidence-based roadmap to address one of the Toronto region's most pressing competitiveness challenges: congestion. The report, [Breaking Gridlock: Congestion Action Plan for Toronto](#), set out five short-term, actionable recommendations to improve traffic flow, reduce delays, and restore mobility across the city and region. While long-term solutions such as transit expansion remain essential to easing congestion over time, these immediate actions were designed to deliver relief now, using tools already within reach.

Since its release, the City of Toronto has taken encouraging steps, formally adopting all five recommendations and embedding them into the [City's Congestion Management Plan](#). But as [Breaking Gridlock](#) emphasized, congestion is not solely a municipal problem — it is a regional crisis that also requires provincial partnership and leadership to resolve.

The province is already taking significant and meaningful action to address the region's mobility challenges. Most important is the unprecedentedly large transit build, centering on the four new subway projects and GO Expansion. Once these are completed, they will have a major effect on the region's mobility. This report highlights additional short-term measures that the province can take to address Toronto's congestion crisis.

The economic case for action is clear. According to a [report](#) by the Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis (CANCEA), congestion costs Ontario \$56.4 billion annually, including \$44.7 billion in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) alone.<sup>1</sup> These costs include:

 **\$10 billion**  
in lost productivity

 **\$2 billion**  
in unrealized investment

 **A drag on job creation, with 88,000 jobs lost annually**

Without bold action, these costs are projected to rise to **\$85.5 billion per year by 2044** as the region grows by 2.1 million people.





Polling conducted by Ipsos underscores growing public frustration with congestion and a demand for immediate solutions.<sup>2</sup> Key findings include:



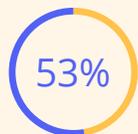
75% of Toronto residents say traffic congestion has a negative impact on their work-life balance.



81% agree that congestion is having a serious impact on business productivity in the region.



88% support increased investment in infrastructure to reduce congestion.



53% of Torontonians considering relocation due to traffic, and 62% are reluctant to travel to work.



87% support policy measures aimed at improving traffic flow, such as better coordination of construction or traffic signal timing.



84% agree the Province of Ontario should play a more active role in solving congestion in the Toronto region.

These insights highlight the urgent need for coordinated action at both municipal and provincial levels to address congestion effectively.

Achieving the full impact of Breaking Gridlock requires action beyond the municipal level. Several critical levers – particularly those related to legislation, regional coordination, and system integration – fall within provincial jurisdiction. These are clear, near-term levers that only the Province can activate, and doing so is essential to reducing congestion at scale and turning municipal commitments into meaningful and measurable results.



# The Role of the City

## Laying the Groundwork for Solutions

The City of Toronto has accepted all five recommendations from the Board's Breaking Gridlock Action Plan, in principle, with further details expected in the City's upcoming release of an updated Congestion Management Plan (CMP). The Board will monitor how these commitments translate into real-world impact. However, the City can only act within the tools and levers available to it. Real progress on congestion will require provincial leadership and coordinated regional action.

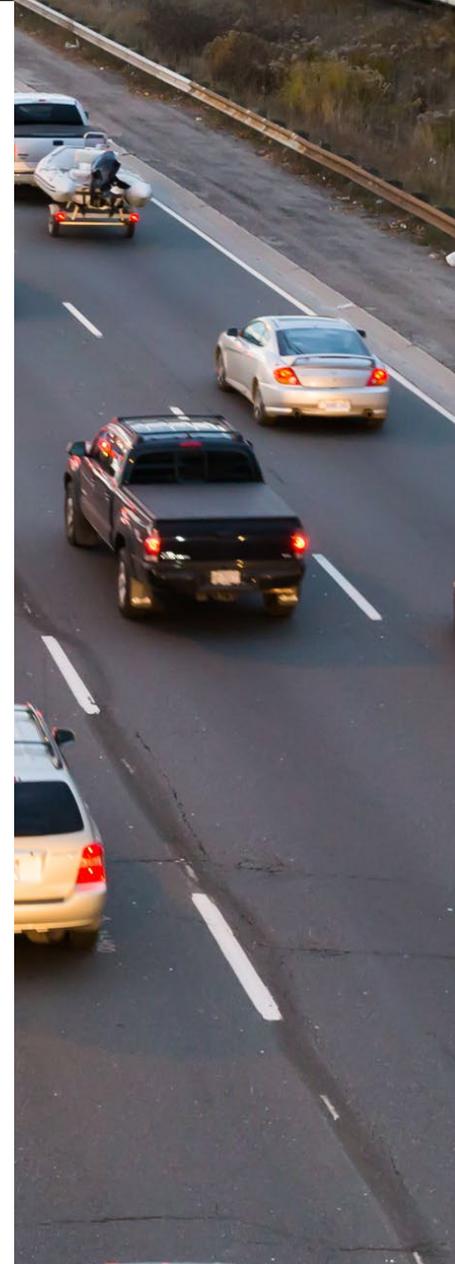
# The Role of the Province

## Five Provincial Actions Needed to Alleviate Congestion

The Province plays a critical enabling role through its authority over legislation, infrastructure management, intergovernmental coordination, and transit integration.

We are calling on the Province to take **five urgent actions** to enable the implementation of Breaking Gridlock's recommendations.

1. Amend the Highway Traffic Act for Additional Automated Enforcement Types
2. Reduce Lane Closures on Provincial Projects
3. Address Critical Bottlenecks Through Provincial Coordination
4. Support Seamless Regional Transit Integration
5. Support the Rollout of a Comprehensive Smart Signals System





Under current legislation, the Highway Traffic Act (HTA §145(1)) limits enforcement to the driver, not the vehicle owner for intersection-blocking violations. As a result, municipalities cannot use automated camera enforcement to issue tickets for intersection-blocking violations.

#### ACTION 1

## Amend the Highway Traffic Act for Additional Automated Enforcement Types

### THE PROBLEM:

Blocked intersections, commonly known as “block-the-box” violations, are among the most disruptive causes of gridlock on arterial roads in Toronto. When vehicles enter an intersection without sufficient space to clear it, they trap cross-traffic and create ripple effects that delay drivers, transit, goods movement, and emergency services.

Unlike speeding enforcement, which can sometimes feel arbitrary, block-the-box enforcement serves a practical, targeted purpose: it directly prevents behaviour that clogs intersections and slows everyone down. Cameras used for this purpose do not measure a driver’s speed or issue tickets for momentary lapses; they record whether a vehicle enters an intersection without sufficient space to clear it, an action that immediately impedes other road users. In this way, automated block-the-box enforcement can function less as a penalty and more as a tool to keep traffic moving smoothly for drivers, transit riders, and emergency services. It provides a fair, behaviour-based approach that municipalities can implement using equipment they have already invested in.

Similarly, other infractions, such as parking in no parking zones, illegal U-turns, improper use of dedicated transit lanes, and running red lights, could be enforced automatically, freeing police to focus on truly dangerous driving. The goal is to maintain two continuous lanes in each direction on major arterials, smoothing traffic flow and reducing hazardous lane changing.

Despite increased fines and public awareness campaigns, enforcement of block-the-box violations today remains manual and highly resource intensive. Officers must be physically present to witness the violation and issue a ticket on the spot to the driver, which makes scalable enforcement across more intersections unfeasible.

Currently the Highway Traffic Act (HTA §145(1)) limits enforcement to the driver, not the vehicle owner. As a result, municipalities cannot use automated camera enforcement to issue tickets for intersection-blocking violations. By contrast, red-light enforcement operates under an owner-liability model, enabled through HTA §§144(18.1), allowing municipalities to hold vehicle owners responsible.

Importantly, no new technology or equipment is required to support this change. This is a practical, low-cost improvement that would allow municipalities to repurpose existing automated enforcement and ticketing equipment they have already invested in, rather than acquiring new infrastructure. Municipalities are simply seeking the ability to use the tools they already have to enforce block-the-box offences, a change that can only be achieved through a targeted legislative amendment.

To support public acceptance and a smooth transition, municipalities could implement a “warnings-first” implementation period — issuing warnings rather than fines — to raise awareness and encourage compliance before monetary penalties are applied.

**THE CALL TO ACTION:**

- Amend the Highway Traffic Act to create a new provision enabling owner-liability for intersection-blocking offences, mirroring the legislative structure used for red-light enforcement. This change should be an integral component of a major roadway mobility initiative aimed at maintaining smooth and continuous travel lanes on major arterials.

It is essential that the regulatory framework maintain robust safeguards for data privacy, system security, and responsible use of information. Fortunately, Ontario already has well-established legal and technological infrastructure for automated enforcement operating under strict access protocols, evidence handling procedures, and secure data governance standards. These existing safeguards can be extended to a new offence category, ensuring that expanded enforcement capabilities are matched with equally strong privacy and safety protections.

**WHAT THIS SOLVES:**

- Enables the City to deploy automated enforcement tools at scale, deterring bad driving behaviour and unblocking key intersections.
- Reduces pressure on human resources and increases consistency in traffic enforcement. It also allows for the re-deployment of police resources where there is greater need.
- Improves traffic flow, especially during peak periods, and enhances overall road safety.
- Reinforces the credibility of municipal congestion measures through fair and reliable enforcement.





Toronto currently charges roughly \$37,000 per month to close a lane of traffic. However, Steer’s research shows that the true social and economic cost of closing a major arterial lane is closer to \$1.7 million per month.

## ACTION 2

# Reduce Lane Closures on Provincial Projects

### THE PROBLEM:

A [study by the Steer Group](#) found that Toronto experiences over 2,000 active lane closures each year,<sup>3</sup> many of which overlap across jurisdictions. In most cases, these closures are uncoordinated and increase congestion by:

- Being scheduled during the daytime, including during peak hours;
- Using lanes to store materials which could potentially be kept elsewhere;
- Closing lanes well before construction begins and leaving them in place overnight or over weekends when no work is occurring; and being approved without coordination with adjacent or upcoming projects.

This highlights a broader provincial challenge: mobility impacts that lead to congestion are not

formally considered in how Ontario procures or permits major infrastructure projects. Many of the largest and most disruptive projects in the Toronto region are provincially led (Ontario Line, Gardiner, QEW, GO Expansion), yet procurement focuses on cost and technical qualifications, with no requirement to minimize the duration or footprint of lane closures. Permit reviews rarely incorporate socioeconomic cost assessments or contractor incentives to reduce disruption.

To put this in perspective, Toronto currently charges roughly \$37,000 per month to close a lane of traffic. However, Steer’s research shows that the true social and economic cost of closing a major arterial lane is closer to \$1.7 million per month.<sup>4</sup> That gap demonstrates how significantly the impact of closures on the network is being undervalued.

Toronto has both low fees and minimal restrictions for lane closures. As a result, lane closures occur too frequently, last too long, and cause unnecessary congestion. By contrast, jurisdictions such as New York City and London use structured “lane rental” or “closure charging” systems that quantify the cost of disruption and hold contractors accountable.<sup>5</sup> These models have successfully reduced closure times and improved coordination without increasing project cost.

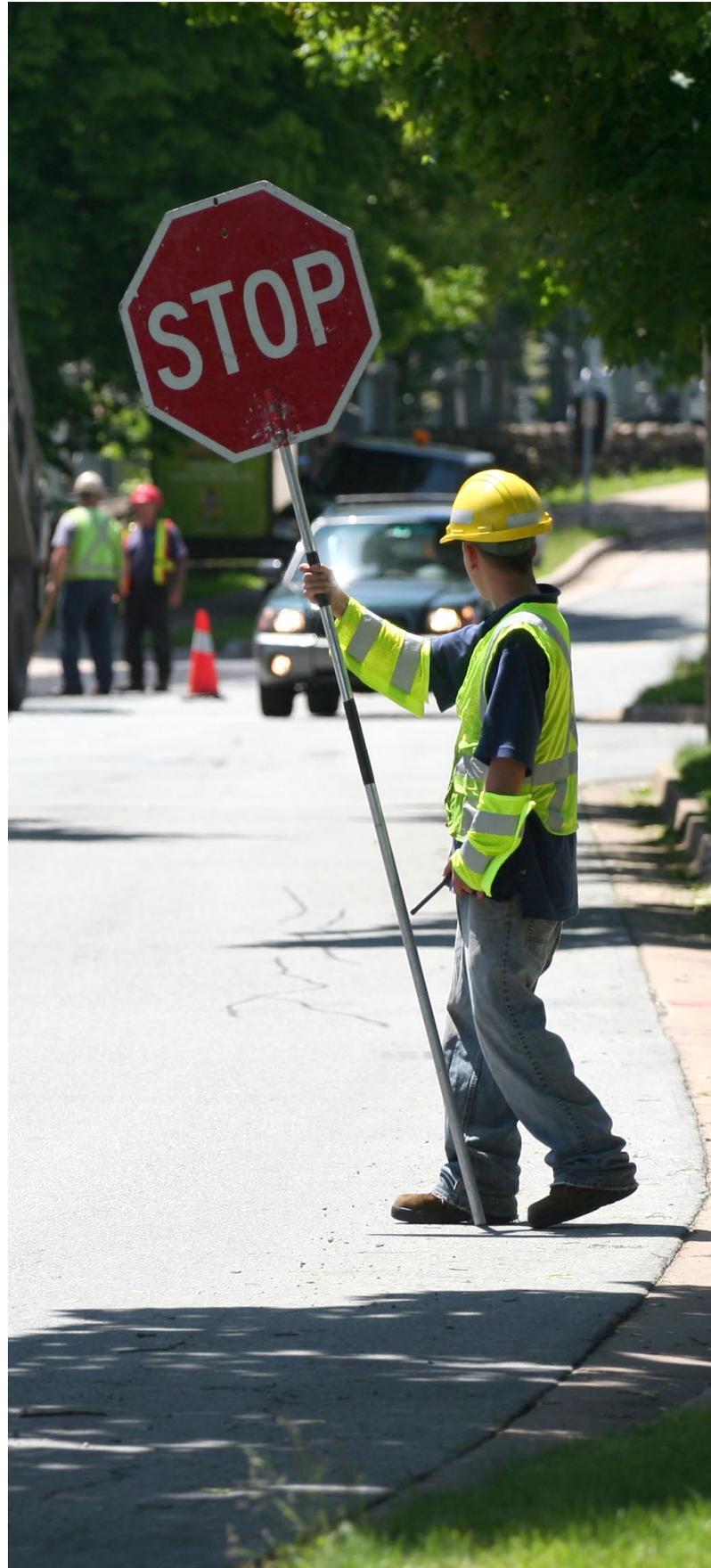
The decision to allow 24/7 construction on the Gardiner Expressway showed what’s possible when urgency and mobility are prioritized. The Province should make this the standard approach for all provincially managed corridors.

**THE CALL TO ACTION:**

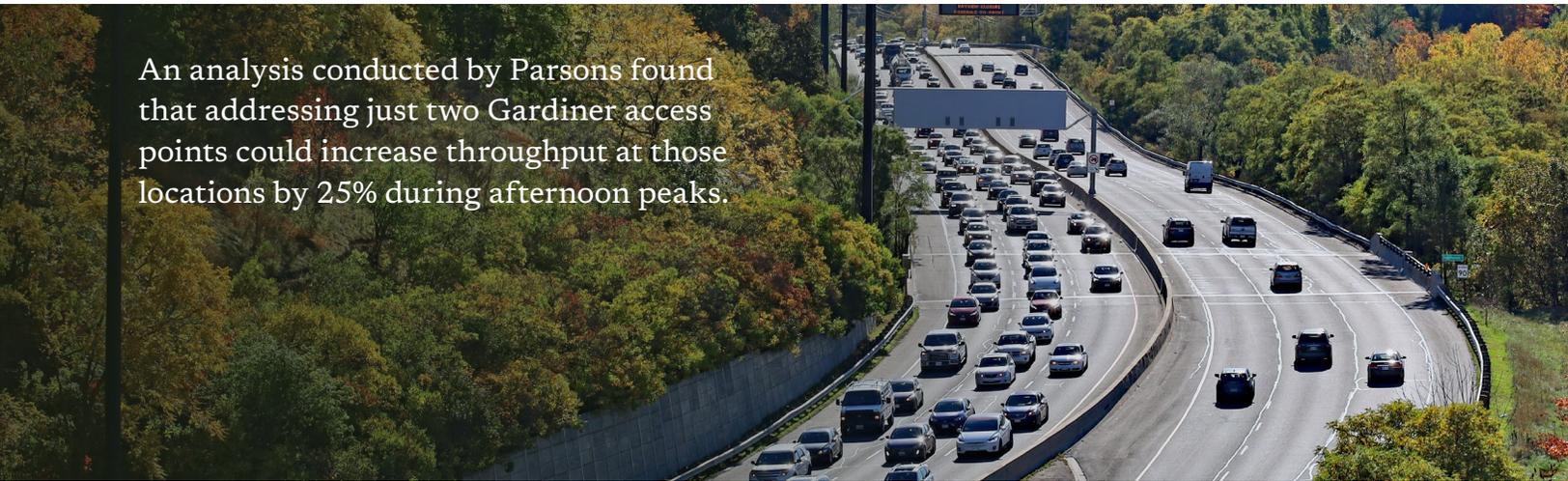
- Require **socioeconomic impact assessments** for lane closures on all provincially managed infrastructure projects, quantifying delays, lost productivity, transit impacts, and freight disruptions.
- Incorporate **mobility performance measures** into provincial construction contracts, such as incentives and permission for off-peak and continuous work.
- Work with municipalities to develop a **coordinated closure approval system** that prioritizes faster, less disruptive delivery models and actively prevents unnecessary project overlaps.
- Expand successful models, such as the Gardiner **24/7 construction schedule**, to additional provincial corridors, making continuous construction the standard on high-traffic routes.
- Use emerging **automated barrier technologies** to enable rapid, daily setup and removal of work-zone protection. This includes modular movable concrete barriers, mobile barrier trailers, automated cone-placement trucks, and potentially drone assisted placement of cones and bollards, allowing safe overnight lane closures and reopening during the day, to avoid peak traffic disruptions.

**WHAT THIS SOLVES:**

- Reduces the duration and unpredictability of lane closures, improving reliability for commuters, freight, and emergency services.
- Promotes a culture of urgency and public accountability in capital delivery, where time lost to congestion is treated as a cost, not a byproduct.



An analysis conducted by Parsons found that addressing just two Gardiner access points could increase throughput at those locations by 25% during afternoon peaks.



**ACTION 3**

**Address Critical Bottlenecks Through Provincial Coordination**

**THE PROBLEM:**

Highways are the backbone of regional mobility, carrying millions of commuters and the vast majority of goods moving through the Toronto region each day. Ontario’s 400-series network, which forms the spine of this system, faces severe bottlenecks where lane geometry, merges, and access points restrict flow and create daily congestion.

As the Gardiner Expressway and Don Valley Parkway (DVP) transition to provincial control, Ontario will assume responsibility for two of the region’s most heavily used corridors. The Province will need to take a comprehensive, region-wide approach to identifying and addressing highway chokepoints.

One prominent example is the Gardiner Expressway westbound on-ramp system. A short merge zone at the York-Bay-Yonge on-ramp, combined with a downstream bottleneck near Spadina, creates cascading delays during peak periods. An analysis conducted by Parsons found that addressing just two Gardiner access points **could increase throughput at those locations by 25% during afternoon peaks.**<sup>6</sup> There is precedent for this type of intervention; in 2016, the City of Toronto modified the Bloor Street East on-ramp to the DVP to address merging conflicts and improve traffic flow.

Ramp metering, minor regrading, signalization, variable electronic signage, or extended merge lanes are relatively low-cost and well understood interventions from an engineering standpoint.

However, progress has been limited due to jurisdictional fragmentation: these ramps sit at the interface of municipal and provincial control, and no single body currently holds the mandate or tools to deliver coordinated solutions. Once the Gardiner and DVP are provincially managed, the Ministry of Transportation will be positioned to integrate them into a broader strategy for optimizing the entire regional highway network.

**THE CALL TO ACTION:**

- Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the provincial highway network in the region, including the Gardiner Expressway and DVP, to identify opportunities to maximize its capacity.
- Use ramp metering, lane reconfiguration, and signage to optimize merging flows and reduce friction between on- and through-traffic.
- Implement targeted improvements at key access points on the Gardiner Expressway, beginning with westbound bottlenecks at York-Bay-Yonge and Spadina.

**WHAT THIS SOLVES:**

- Improves throughput at high-friction entry points, restoring flow along some of the region’s most heavily used corridors and enabling more efficient movement of people and goods.
- Delivers quick, low-capital-impact gains with measurable benefits for drivers and freight carriers.



Without seamless connections and predictable service across the system, many commuters continue to rely on private vehicles, undermining efforts to reduce congestion, emissions, and travel time.

**ACTION 4**

**Support Seamless Regional Transit Integration**

**THE PROBLEM:**

Ontario’s One Fare Program, supported by the Board’s long-standing advocacy on fare integration, has been an enormous success, saving Ontarians millions on transit fares, improving fairness, and attracting new riders. The Government of Ontario’s recent announcement to continue the program is great news for transit riders and businesses across the region.

It is now time to build on this success with comprehensive service integration. Currently, each transit agency (TTC, GO Transit, MiWay, YRT, etc.) plans, schedules, and operates largely independently, which leads to:

- Uncoordinated schedules, resulting in long transfer times and inefficient multi-modal trips.
- Disjointed service standards, with frequency, reliability, and infrastructure varying widely across boundaries, limiting access to talent for business.
- Barriers to operational integration, particularly between the TTC and regional systems, due in part to legacy labour agreements and insufficient operating resources.
- Fare inconsistencies, where local GO trips remain more expensive than comparable local transit, discouraging riders from using available GO capacity to shorten their journeys.

Without seamless connections and predictable service across the system, many commuters continue to rely

on private vehicles, undermining efforts to reduce congestion, emissions, and travel time. Transit’s ability to support inclusive workforce mobility and access to housing and jobs is weakened when the system functions as a set of disconnected silos rather than a unified network.

**THE CALL TO ACTION:**

- Lead a regional transit integration initiative that builds on fare integration to include full service integration. This should follow the model outlined in the Board’s [Erasing the Invisible Line](#) report. Under this model, agencies maintain operational independence but are bound by a common framework for schedule coordination, shared real-time data, unified trip planning, and joint service planning.
- Provide sustained, multi-year operating and state-of-good-repair funding to the TTC and other municipal systems, enabling them to contribute effectively to regional service solutions without compromising local reliability. Alternatively, explore private sector operating models to achieve similar outcomes.

**WHAT THIS SOLVES:**

- Enables faster, more reliable transfers and continuous journeys, encouraging drivers to shift to transit for regional trips.
- Expands job access across municipal boundaries, especially for lower-income and shift workers who depend on predictable transit.



**ACTION 5**

## Support the Rollout of a Comprehensive Smart Signals System

**THE PROBLEM:**

Toronto operates roughly 2,400 traffic signals, many of which rely on aging legacy systems that follow fixed timing cycles for morning and afternoon rush hours and off-peak periods. These fixed-timing signals cannot respond to real-time conditions, leaving drivers, cyclists, and transit riders stuck at red lights even when opposing lanes are empty.

The City of Toronto has piloted two generations of smart signal technology based on systems first used in London and Sydney. Both systems use real-time traffic detection to dynamically adjust signal timing. The City is now undertaking an additional set of pilot projects. However, these pilots only cover a small fraction of Toronto’s intersections and operate on separate systems. A citywide system could optimize all intersections.

The experience of Toronto’s two newest transit lines has underscored the need for action. In March 2026, Mayor Chow announced that phase one of transit signal priority improvements is now active on the new Line 5 (Eglinton) and Line 6 (Finch West) LRTs. The city has made changes to traffic signals at all intersections on Line 6 and select intersections on Line 5, moving trains ahead of left-turning vehicles. Additional enhancements to make signals more dynamic and responsive in real time are in the works. A comprehensive smart signals system would make these capabilities standard across all major bus and streetcar corridors, maximizing the value of the province’s unprecedented transit investments.

Unlike traditional traffic lights fixed to set timing cycles, adaptive systems allow individual signals to communicate with each other and adjust collectively

to changing conditions. This maximizes the throughput on existing road infrastructure without the cost or disruption of building new lanes.

**THE CALL TO ACTION:**

- Support the City of Toronto financially with the rollout of a comprehensive smart signals system throughout the city.
- The first phase of this rollout could be operational in time for the FIFA World Cup, which city modelling suggests will add 10 to 15 per cent more vehicles to key downtown corridors, with even higher impacts on the six scheduled match days. While the city is already planning traffic signal modifications on designated game-day travel routes, a smart signals system would make these interventions faster, more flexible, and more effective.

**WHAT THIS SOLVES:**

- A well-designed smart signals system can meaningfully reduce road congestion. Well-documented deployments in comparable cities show reductions in vehicle delay of 15-20% or more, enabling better use of the existing road infrastructure.
- A smart signals system can be fully integrated with transit signal priority, altering signal timings to allow transit vehicles to move more quickly through intersections, improving the reliability, speed, and effective frequency of bus and streetcar routes.
- A smart system eliminates the need for manual reprogramming of individual signals, enabling real-time flexibility and dynamic response to special events, construction closures, or other disruptions.



# Looking Ahead

The Board's [Breaking Gridlock](#) report highlighted that congestion is a regional crisis and that many of the most powerful levers for change sit squarely with the Province. While the Board will continue to monitor the City's implementation of its commitments, lasting progress requires the Province to activate the tools only it controls: legislation, procurement, regional coordination, and system integration.

Public frustration is mounting, and businesses see congestion as a direct threat to the region's competitiveness, discouraging investment. By stepping forward with purpose, the Province can reinforce its commitment to world-class infrastructure and mobility while restoring public confidence that governments can deliver solutions at the scale congestion demands.

Ontario has already shown leadership through bold transit investments and targeted congestion interventions. Now it must build on that momentum by scaling what works, closing gaps in policy and governance, and embedding a lasting provincial framework for accountability and results.

By stepping forward with purpose, the Province can reinforce its commitment to world-class infrastructure and mobility while restoring public confidence that governments can deliver solutions at the scale congestion demands.



## Endnotes

- 1 Canadian Centre for Economic Analysis. (2024, December 9). Impact of congestion in the GTHA and Ontario: Economic and social risks [Report]. <https://www.cancea.ca/index.php/2024/12/09/impact-of-congestion-in-the-gtha-and-ontario-economic-and-social-risks/>
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- 3 Steer. (n.d.). Road blocks: Incentivizing smarter road closures [Report]. Toronto Region Board of Trade. <https://prodwebsitestrbot.blob.core.windows.net/prod-medialibrary/bot/media/pdf/congestionplaybook/road-blocks-incentivizing-smarter-road-closures-steer.pdf>
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- 6 Parsons Corporation. (n.d.). Bottleneck analysis and best practices [Report]. Toronto Region Board of Trade. <https://prodwebsitestrbot.blob.core.windows.net/prod-medialibrary/bot/media/pdf/congestionplaybook/bottleneck-analysis-and-best-practices-parsons.pdf>





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