

Globe editorial

## **Truly environmental**

Globe and Mail, January 19, 2009 at 12:00 AM EST

The proposed rail link between Toronto's Union Station and Pearson International Airport is precisely the sort of project governments should be investing in, as they seek to boost infrastructure spending. It is also a prime example of how an overreaching environmental assessment process can work against the public interest, and why John Baird, the federal Minister of Infrastructure, is right to seek ways to accelerate approvals.

The planned train route, known as the “Blue 22,” would do more than create jobs and pump government funds into a troubled economy (though it would do that, too); it would have benefit long past the end of the recession, and indeed was being considered long before it started. Providing easier access to the country's largest airport from the heart of its financial capital would be a boon to productivity. And perhaps the greatest benefit would be environmental, since allowing travellers to take a short train trip to the airport rather than a long car ride (particularly at peak hours of congestion) would significantly reduce pollution.

More than a decade after the Blue 22 was first proposed, however, there has yet to be a shovel in the ground. In recent years, it has been bogged down in an environmental assessment that – as is often the case with infrastructure projects – has drifted far away from real environmental concerns. It became instead a forum for local residents to fight the development on the ground that they don't want the train to run through their neighbourhoods. While that is a fair concern that governments should take into consideration when planning, it is a social issue – not an environmental one.

In hope of accelerating such developments, the Ontario government introduced a new regulation last year that allows for more limited assessments that would take about six months rather than the standard two to three years. Now that the Crown corporation advancing the rail link has adopted the accelerated process, residents are up in arms; the head of the Weston Community Coalition recently speculated that “only lip service” would be paid to the “impact on the local community” and speculated that “the ‘accelerated’ EA was designed specifically for this project.”

If so, it should be applied to more projects like it – and not just in Ontario. While there is room to reduce overlap between the federal and provincial governments, it is essential that one level or the other look closely at the risk for any environmental degradation. But worthwhile projects should not be delayed for years while environmental assessments are co-opted by activists. And at a time when “shovel-readiness” is considered a prerequisite, there is no reason relatively simple projects should require longer than six months to address.