

Waterfront plan would tear down east Gardiner

\$300-million proposal to be unveiled Friday

JEFF GRAY AND JENNIFER LEWINGTON

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TORONTO — The Gardiner Expressway should be torn down east of Jarvis Street to make way for the dramatic rejuvenation of the city's waterfront, according to a proposal being pushed by Mayor David Miller.

The plan, which would replace the eastern and less-used section of the Gardiner with a University-Avenue-style boulevard, would cost more than \$300-million, according to one official familiar with the proposal.

Waterfront Toronto, the joint city-provincial-federal development agency that has long been accused by critics of dragging its feet, will outline the plans at a news conference this morning.

The agency's board, on which Mr. Miller sits, is to vote on the plan in June. But the scheme will still face several hurdles.

It must be approved by city council, where the mayor's opponents are certain to raise the concerns of drivers who use the expressway every day.

And it faces a lengthy environmental assessment that alone could take four to five years and cost \$10-million, followed by several years of construction.

Plus, questions remain about the effect on crosstown traffic, and what funding each level of government would commit to the project.

Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong, who represents a suburban ward in North York, expressed concerns the plan would create headaches for drivers and sap funds from the city's current backlog in road maintenance, also worth about \$300-million.

"Will this come at the expense of all the roads that are falling apart across the city?" he asked.

The mayor has said in the past that he would support tearing down the Gardiner from as far west as Yonge Street, if funding could be found.

In a statement yesterday, he said this new proposal would boost redevelopment along the eastern waterfront.

"This is the most practical approach and offers the greatest public benefits," Mr. Miller said, calling the move "an affordable step."

He was in Quebec City for meetings with municipal officials from across the

country. His spokesman, Stuart Green, said further details about the plans would be released at today's press conference.

Previous reports have called for more of the Gardiner to be torn down, with cost estimates as high as \$1.5-billion. But deputy mayor Joe Pantalone said this latest plan offers a "pragmatic" approach.

"You can wish for heaven and earth and don't settle for any less and you get nothing," he said. "Or you say you can improve this part of the city in a sensitive part of the waterfront and you can achieve it."

According to sources, a push to take down another east-end segment of the Gardiner picked up steam in recent weeks at meetings of the Waterfront Toronto board, with Mr. Miller leading the charge.

At a closed meeting this month, the board members agreed a formal decision would be made at their next session on June 12.

In 2001, a less-used section of the Gardiner farther east, from the Don River to Leslie Street, was torn down.

A massive 2004 report by the waterfront agency - which opponents of the mayor accused him of suppressing in the lead-up to the 2006 municipal election, a charge he denies - suggested taking down the Gardiner much farther west at Spadina Avenue and replacing it with two five-lane at-grade one-way roads that lead to an eight-lane avenue, at a cost of at least \$758-million.

Using computer modelling, it suggested most drivers who use the Gardiner would see their commutes lengthened by about three minutes under this scheme and that average travel speeds on the streets around the torn-down expressway would decrease as much as 23 per cent.

The Gardiner carries approximately 200,000 cars a day, with 70 per cent coming from outside the 416 area code, according to the report.

The earlier proposal assumed that the Richmond/Adelaide and the Eastern/Front Street on- and off-ramps on the Don Valley Parkway would be widened to accept much of the traffic now using the eastern section of the Gardiner in and out of downtown.

It also assumed that the controversial \$256-million Front Street Extension -

long a bone of contention at city hall - was to be built to connect the downtown to the remaining western section of the Gardiner. But there were unconfirmed reports yesterday that this project, long stalled by opponents, is now off the table.

Waterfront Toronto president and CEO John Campbell declined to comment except to say that "the Gardiner is the point" of today's announcement, though he did not deny reports that the cancellation of the controversial Front Street Extension will also be recommended.

A spokeswoman for Ontario Infrastructure Minister David Caplan disputed reports that the province was withdrawing support for the Front Street extension, a "priority" waterfront project that has been in limbo for years.

"We are still committed to the original agreement," said Amy Tang, the minister's spokeswoman.

Mr. Pantalone, a long-time advocate of the road extension, said it becomes less of a priority with the proposed partial takedown of the Gardiner.

"Maybe that [Front Street] is an issue for the next generation," he said.

The 2004 report on taking down the Gardiner also included possible sources of revenue to cover its costs, suggesting that tolls could raise as much as \$131-million a year, but playing down this option as unpalatable.

The city would also rake in money simply by taking the Gardiner down. Formerly undesirable property near the expressway would suddenly become prime waterfront real estate, resulting in a property tax windfall of at least \$70-million a year, the report estimated. Removing an elevated segment of the eastern leg of the expressway would "liberate," as one source put it, a significant segment of the waterfront poised for major redevelopment.

Waterfront Toronto is working on the creation of two brand-new neighbourhoods in the east end, West Don Lands and East Bay Front, over the next decade, with the lure of living and working near the water's edge.

"It will be even more dramatic without the expressway severing the development," one source said.