

Transit Priority on Spadina/Harbourfront
By Steve Munro
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The Spadina streetcar opened for service nearly 8 years ago in July 1997. Fundamental to its design was the provision of reserved lanes and transit priority signaling – this was as important then for Spadina as it is for the St. Clair scheme today.

Various claims of time-saving were made, but the 1997 Service Plan was the most recent, and it said that up to 4 minutes would be saved by riders of the line. On May 7, the *Globe and Mail* published an article entitled *Rapid Transit? Not on Spadina*. This article talks about the failed promise of the Spadina LRT and by extension the dubious justification for the St. Clair line.

Let me say up front that I disagree with many points in the article, but the underlying argument is sound – Spadina has not lived up to its billing. First let's look at comparative running times.

Date	Route Segment	Running Time
1932: Spadina car	Bloor to Fleet (now Lake Shore)	15'00"
April 1954: Spadina bus	Bloor to King	15'00"
June 1997: Spadina bus	Bloor to Wellington	16'30"
July 1997: Spadina streetcar	Bloor to Queen's Quay	18'00" (includes layover)
June 2005: Spadina streetcar	Bloor to King	14'00"

The 1932 running time is taken from a Spadina car transfer of the period. All other times are taken from scheduled service summaries.

One can argue that the scheduled time for the Spadina bus was mythical as anyone who waited for one in the rush hour will remember. However, what is clear is that a streetcar still takes roughly the same time to cover the distance between King and Bloor as it did over 70 years ago.

One big change is the number of traffic lights. Contrary to popular opinion, the streetcars **do not** run the traffic lights. Very limited priority signaling is in place, mainly to assist turns, and I understand that City Planning & Transportation staff refuses to implement the priority capabilities of the signals. The claim is that doing so would fatally disrupt operations on intersecting streets.

Recent observations by me show that a streetcar can expect to be held needlessly for roughly 4 minutes on its trip from Bloor to King mainly because the traffic signals do not give extended green times to approaching streetcars. Cars are often caught by lights turning red as they approach. When the lights do turn green, the streetcars must wait for left-turning traffic to clear.

These needless waits, oddly, match the savings we were supposed to obtain with the new LRT line and its transit priority. They also mean that three or four cars on the line exist simply to accommodate the traffic light delays.

Problems also exist south of King, especially at Lake Shore where delays can be quite long. Harbourfront has fewer problems, but is still plagued by the close spacing of traffic signals and the inability to detect a car far enough in advance of an intersection to ensure a green phase when the streetcar arrives. Harbourfront also suffers from having dedicated transit green phases – the transit signal is always red until a streetcar approaches, and streetcars almost always have to stop at many locations.

Other streetcar routes suffer from the installation of new traffic signals that may not have transit priority sensing from the day they are activated. Many new traffic signals are appearing at such close spacing that they are between streetcar stops. Cars must wait for them to cycle even though they are not serving any passengers.

We are “Building a Transit City”, but in the crunch, we give priority to cars. Transit always comes second, and moreover transit projects like Spadina and St. Clair are used as Trojan horses to justify road widening. If we are to believe the rhetoric about transit priority, the TTC and Council must fundamentally change the rules for transportation planning and operations.

Recommendations:

1. The TTC and Council should direct the Planning & Transportation Department to implement transit priority signaling on Spadina at all locations where it is not already active. A one-year trial operation should begin no later than September 2005, with a report to the TTC and Council in the fall of 2006 on the impact, if any, on traffic operations.
2. The operation of transit priority signaling at intersections with long cross-street green times should be reviewed, and transit vehicles should be given more frequent access to green time in the cycle.
3. The TTC and Planning & Transportation should integrate transit priority signaling with any new traffic signal installations on routes which already have priority signals. Activation of the new signals should not be permitted unless the transit priority component is operational.
4. All road and track reconstruction projects should include replacement of priority signaling detectors as an integral part of the projects so that priority signals are available when service resumes.
5. The TTC and Planning & Transportation should determine a method to allow closely spaced priority signals to be activated as a group so that signals that are not at transit stops can give transit vehicles a coordinated green wave.
6. The TTC should investigate the provision of technology allowing operators to request transit priority when they are at nearside stops to allow signals to cycle to green while the transit vehicle completes loading.

We need to be serious about transit priority if we are to address the demands growing ridership and congestion in our city will place on the TTC.