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Posted on Friday 19 February 2010



TORONTO – Toronto's public transit system (known as the "TTC" for Toronto Transit Commission) is in such a state of turmoil that only a radical, can't-even-see-the-box-from-here approach will fix it. At present, it's a middling-good, ad-hoc network of buses, electric streetcars (as pictured), light rail and subways operated by an aggressively unionized cabal that most riders perceive as underworked, overpaid, uncivil and barely competent thugs.

Incremental improvement to the current system is impossible in its present state of open reputational warfare between union, management, the political board of directors, City Hall proper, the media, the paying passengers and the broader public. I've never seen such a mess.

Fed-up riders are snapping cell-phone photos and shooting videos of sleeping fare collectors and slackard drivers then posting them to the internet where they are generating a sense of common outrage amongst the million or so people who rely on the system each day. Pissed off unionistas, upset that riders are holding them to account, fired back with their own Facebook site to call their customers ill-mannered boobs. *I am **not** making this up!*

In an election year, the exclusively left-wing political elite on the TTC board are ducking for cover. Management of the system is, for all intents and purposes, absent with leave.

In fact, it's safe to say that, from a rider's perspective, there is no professional management of the TTC whatsoever. Apparently, there is a General Manager (a position that was high profile a number of years ago, but has since subsided into irrelevance,) however I can't find anyone who knows who this person is, nor what he (or she?) does. Instead, the system is run by a part-time board of city politicians working closely with the union.

How to fix it?

The time for subtle fixes, or nuanced strategic "refocusing," is long gone for the TTC. The only hope this beast can be fixed lies with radical surgery. And, radical surgery is worth it.

The TTC accounts for more of the City's budget than any other department, save the police force. In fact, 16 per cent of the \$9.2 Billion (yes that's Billion with a 'B') 2010 operating budget of the City of Toronto goes to keeping the TTC rolling. On the capital side, City Hall will spend \$1.33 Billion this year alone to purchase new buses, streetcars and make other capital investments in TTC infrastructure. These are real dollars and they are driving out-of-control increases in property taxes that are forcing Toronto residents, and especially its small businesses, to begin planning an exodus to the outer suburbs.

A simple exercise: eliminate the TTC

Here's what planners should do. First, *they should assume the City will simply stop funding the TTC come April 1, 2011.* Period. No more city money to transit.

Why is the city in the transit business anyway? Clearly, they're no good at it. Return the millions (and billions) of city dollars spent on transit to the taxpayers, reduce (or hold the line) on property taxes. The City should focus its efforts on delivering the services that only a City can deliver. Transit isn't one of them.

Given the abandonment of transit in 2011, planners should then ask themselves: "So, what?"

So, what happens if the city doesn't do transit anymore? First off, how much money could the city make selling off TTC assets? I'll bet it's a billion dollars. More than enough to pay off any pension liabilities and make a big dent in the city's ballooning debt.

But how will people get to and from work, shopping, school, etc? Good question. I imagine more people may drive — so some of the billions the city saves should go to improving its roads. Others will be forced to use bicycles, hire more taxis, join car pools, etc. Apparently, that's good for the environment, even. Bonus.

But, before long — in fact, before April 1, 2011 I'd wager — some bright entrepreneurs will smell an opportunity. Someone will approach the city to buy pieces of the TTC with a view to continue operating them for a profit.

The subway system, for example, is a good asset. You could run the subway for a profit, I bet, if you were smart about it. Someone would buy the subway system.

There would also be buyers for some parts of the street car and busing networks. Some of these could be profitable — either those that feed into the subway, or those that operate in high traffic areas where the subway doesn't exist.

Many bus routes, however, would be abandoned. They're not profitable. Such is life. The TTC should have dumped these routes long ago. *But what about the people who need them?* Well, life's tough. Instead of being

the only three people on a 60 passenger bus, perhaps these people will have to introduce themselves, get to know their neighbours and share a taxi.

In fact, I image there will be entrepreneurs who look to run “mini-buses” in poorly served neighbourhoods, connecting people from their homes to the subway and major bus routes. Operating smaller vehicles, with non-union drivers (or owner-operated,) they could make a profit at an affordable price.

Given the increase in customer volume, Toronto's taxi fleets might be able to reduce costs to compete for passengers forced off of non-profitable buses.

Is that it, then? Abandon TTC riders to private sector wolves?

Yes, and no. Yes, if the TTC can't see beyond the obvious. If that's the case, perhaps the city's role in transit should be limited to licensing and regulating private sector operators. The city could earn a tidy sum in recurring revenue from doing so.

No, however, if the TTC can learn from this planning exercise, and get back to root causes. Why do I want transit? Not because I want drivers to have gold-plated pensions, or jobs for life. Not because I want to send fat-cat politicians on junkets to transit conferences in Singapore. Not because I want shiny mobile billboards for singles' websites patrolling major traffic routes in my neighbourhood. No.

I want a fast, convenient and affordable way of getting from the door of my home to the doorway of my workplace, shopping centre, school, theatre, friends' houses, etc. That's what the TTC should be providing: door to door solutions. The subway has value only when it's delivering this. Ditto buses. Ditto streetcars.

The TTC should take this opportunity to deconstruct its assumptions and rebuild its mission from scratch. Maybe city residents would be better served by licensed neighbourhood minibuses picking them up from their front doors and dropping them at the nearest subway stop. Maybe the city should subsidize taxi rates rather than buying new buses. Maybe there are other off-the-wall ideas that would help transform the TTC from a loadstone around the neck of taxpayers into a vibrant, essential service.

Maybe.

Knowing the calibre of Toronto's political leadership thus far, however, I'm very afraid... *maybe not.*

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