

**Senior College Symposium
Meeting the Challenges for Transit in Toronto's Future
University of Toronto
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Note: This version has been amended to consolidate notes and remarks made at the symposium and my reaction to some other speakers. There is more material here than I actually presented due to time constraints.

The conventional joke is that Toronto has a wonderful transit system for a city of about 1m people. Talking about transit's future is difficult when its present is far from secure. The problem is much bigger than simply this year's war over technologies – subways versus light rapid transit – or the political dynamics of the Fords versus City Council. The Toronto region has decades of inaction, a pervasive reluctance to spend money on a transit network and service, and a lack of political leadership.

In his overview introducing this symposium, Andre Sorenson argued that the GTA does not have sprawl in the conventional sense that much of the 905 is developed at a fairly high density. This may be true, but equally transit has not kept pace with growth of the 905 and travel demand is very auto-oriented. Comparisons with other cities, notably those in Europe but also New York City, need to look not just at densities and transit service, but also at the history of each city. Any city with millions of residents in 1900 had a ready-made market for transit and large-scale investment would be feasible. Development patterns could not evolve with “sprawl” (however defined) because it would be impractical for people to travel over long distances without enough density to justify the creation of a transit network.

Notwithstanding recent funding announcements, Toronto and the GTA have seen minimal investment for past decades. Skewed priorities led to “vanity” subways to serve hoped-for local growth within “town centres”, and one might ask how the 416 might have evolved without the egos and aspirations of its former cities and boroughs distorting land use and transit planning.

- Expensive projects within Toronto – projects versus network building – approach encouraged by project-based funding and ribbon-cutting mentality – contrast to low-cost projects in the 905 – regional envy
- David Miller's Transit City tried to shift the debate to a network view, but it was poorly explained and understood, and fell victim to the anti-Miller campaign leading to Ford's election.
- Regional focus has been on 905-to-core commuting primarily with a model of drive to park to GO. Travel within the 905 has been left mainly to local transit systems with a smattering of GO bus services.
- Declining support for local transit and poor service for trips that are not oriented to commuting corridors – some exceptions where local demand is growing, but it's an uphill battle

There are cutbacks to TTC and other systems even while we fight over the right way to spend \$8b in capital. This is similar to the problem described by Janet Carding where the arts see millions for new facility construction, but inadequate funding to actually operate and mount programs in these buildings.

Do we believe in transit?

- In the 905, transit is not an option for most travel, not even part of the menu potential riders take seriously.
- In the 416, we get by, but we cut service even while riders complain of crowding problems.
- The TTC looks physically run down around the edges, and we take for granted that that's how things are – deferred maintenance plus acceptance of things like handwritten signs and out of date info.
- How extensive is the problem with “out of sight” cutbacks?
- Transit needs are much greater than smiling staff.

What is transit supposed to do?

- Is it a peak commuting service, or an all day provider of mobility across the region? How people might answer is strongly coloured by what they experience today.
- Is convenience more important than “efficiency”? Are we prepared to over-supply transit to achieve attractiveness?
- An auto sitting in a driveway unused is a “convenience”, but a bus running every 15 minutes with only a handful of passengers is “inefficient”. We choose to invest in personal transport for convenience, but complain when service appears to be excessive for others.
- What do we mean by “equity” in service (parts of city, demographics) and in fares (by distance, by time, by class of service, social goals re long trips)
- The debate about fare technology masks the policy question of what fares should be. The technology allows more “flexibility”, but how exactly would this be used?
- We already have GO fares that are lower, per km travelled, for long distance commuters as a matter of policy. Should this be the model for all fares? Should frequent short trips be encouraged? How do we share fare revenue for riders who use more than one system for their trip?

Congestion

- I take the claims that we lose \$6b annually to congestion with a grain of salt. It's a scary number, but it is not clear how we would undo the problem.
- The big challenge is that the location of much congestion (and the source of that "loss") does not lend itself to replacement of traffic by transit.
- Maps of projected congestion growth to 2031 show that the majority of congestion today is in the older part of the region where it is comparatively easy to provide better transit. Future congestion is in the outlying areas where the population and land use changes have not been matched by capacity in roads on transit.
- Freight and diffuse local demands might benefit if trips can be shifted to transit, but the corridors where transit might work don't necessarily match those where captive road users are stuck in traffic.
- Example of logistics migration outward from 905 – transit improvements are not going to fix congestion in those areas – Mississauga may be too congested now, but that is unlikely to change even with billions in new transit lines.
- Even The Big Move acknowledged that after 25 years and billions of capital, we would at best be no better off than today – just keeping up with 100K+ annual growth in GTA population and related demand
- It is difficult to understand how we will "monetize" any savings that might occur to pay for the transit investments we make – public investment may translate into private savings, but can we / should we try to recover this value? Direct benefits are reduced cost and improved quality of life for transit users who can switch from cars. There may be indirect benefits in reduced congestion (or more capacity for backfill trips up to whatever level of congestion road users will tolerate) and in economic benefits such as workforce mobility and increased value of land around major transit nodes. None of this lends itself to recapture by the public sector which invests in the new transit lines and their operation.
- Marginal improvements have benefits, but real change requires major new transit capacity – not a few trains here and there. Bus networks can work, but the service level needs to be good enough that waiting is not the majority of a transit trip.
- GO Transit is wrestling with constraints of rail network – station capacity, train spacing, electrification – we have run out of the easy fixes
- Fundamental change if GO becomes all day two way service – regional rapid transit network – effect on GO's cost recovery and on requirements for local transit systems as feeder/distributor (just as the TTC surface network supports the subway system)
- Are we overpromising what transit can achieve (or will be seen to achieve in medium term)? Is it saleable without a certain amount of deception?

Funding schemes

- The Fords are a symptom of a “something for nothing” mentality that infects much “conservative” thought
- The magic of “the private sector” – creative accounting – mortgage our future to pay for pet projects today – bet on revenues that may or may not materialize, or sequester revenues that were intended to pay for other things
- “Tax Increment Financing” assumes that there will be real marginal growth of revenues resulting from capital investment in transit rather than simply a redistribution of growth into “TIF Zone” from other parts of the region. No guarantee that development will happen where we want it. Example of Sheppard Subway planning for North York and Scarborough centres. Projected employment growth (even assuming it wasn’t cooked for political reasons) actually went to more attractive locations.
- Queen’s Park now engages in “asset” vs “subsidy” accounting. If they “own” a new subway, then the capital debt has an offsetting asset. This only works if there is a chance they might sell their subway at least for its book value, and does not address the problem of future operating and major repair costs.
- At the end of the day, somebody has to pay for transit infrastructure and operations.
- Tools are well known – tolls, gas tax, parking lot tax, regional sales tax
- Nobody wants to take that discussion to voters – as soon as anything is proposed, a chorus shouts “not us, not us” (recent proposal for parking tax was opposed by Scarborough Town Centre)
- “Investment Strategy” discussions ongoing for years, but not planned for publication until mid 2013 – we have to wait over a year just to get to the point of starting to talk about revenues.
- Presumption on the right wing that any new tax will be wasted and that if only we could “get our house in order”, there are billions in “efficiencies” just waiting to be tapped.
- The problem complicated because we don’t really know the full list and cost of what is needed – Metrolinx Big Move left a lot out to keep the price tag under control for political reasons – will TBM 2.0 correct or perpetuate this problem?

Leadership

- TTC still digesting the coup d'état by Ford's opponents – a new balance of power and de facto leader/policy options have not yet emerged at Council
- The role of official organizations vs “civil society” (including this symposium) is unclear – why is so much of the discussion taking place without political leadership?
- Metrolinx has no profile since disappearance of political board – everyone at UofT probably knows Rob Prichard, the Metrolinx Chair, from his days at the university – can anyone name other members of the board?
- Technical discussions are at Metrolinx staff level, but there is no sense of what they are actually doing.
- There is no consolidated voice for the region

Political leadership must engage the public both in the 416 and beyond into the 905 in the complex problems of transit's role for coming decades.

Discussions we need to have:

- What is transit for?
- What is our target for transit quality and ridership / mode share?
- Should transit be a convenient way to travel all day, everywhere, or just a commuter option?
- What do we mean by “convenient”? Frequent and easy for me, but “efficient” for you?
- How much are we prepared to pay for quality (not just capital, but also operating costs)?
- Should fares (and subsidies) encourage longer trips to move to transit, or should frequent users be rewarded with discounts or capped total costs?
- Do we consolidate services, fares, subsidies? If we eliminate the problem of “crossing the boundaries”, is this just a question of service design, or do we lower fares to eliminate inequities caused by a balkanized regional fare structure?
- Does a “local option” remain for municipalities to have “better than average” service, or is Eglinton and Yonge doomed to have bus service as infrequently as Burlington?
- Are transit subsidies worth the benefit of improved mobility, reduced individual transportation costs, trip diversion from autos to transit, especially when broader savings (including environmental ones) may not “monetize”?
- How do we make transit more attractive for as many as possible, share the costs, but recognize that it will not fix every transportation problem from decades of auto-oriented region building?
- What are the limits (financial, logistical) on the rate at which we can improve transit?
- Are the answers the same throughout the GTA, or must we accept different tiers of quantity/quality based on actual built form of the region?
- What do we need, how will we pay for it, what will be the effect of a continued “little or nothing” approach?