

Deputation by Steve Munro to the Toronto Transit Commission Meeting of August 19, 2014

Re: Opportunities to Improve Transit Service in Toronto

The “Opportunities” report is a long-overdue move by TTC management to argue the case for improved service on the existing transit system. The last four years have been consumed by endless wrangling over rapid transit routes and technologies while the bread-and-butter of Toronto’s transit – actually moving people around the city – was treated only as an opportunity to cut costs and reduce service.

This must change if transit is to be a credible travel alternative. Rapid transit may be attractive, but most TTC riders use a bus or streetcar to reach those lines, and many trips do not involve a subway line at all. These riders have been short-changed and they deserve better.

Fare policies

The most important of the proposals is the move away from a transfer-based fare system to the two-hour fare. Not only will this bring the TTC into line with other GTHA agencies and with the capabilities of Presto, it will address a long-standing concern brought forward every time fare increases are proposed. Some riders have travel patterns with a number of short-hop trips, but not on a regular basis. They prefer to “pay as you go” rather than to buy passes in advance. Moving to a two-hour fare will be a real reduction in their cost of travel.

Yes, this is a fare subsidy, but it is a better targeted one than across-the-board freezes, and it will rebalance the cost of service to casual users with that already enjoyed by pass holders.

All-door loading and the move to Proof-of-Payment is another important change because it will improve space utilization in vehicles and speed loading at stops. However, the actual effect will vary across the system because many lines already see all-door loading either unofficially (operators who have no other way to load waiting passengers) or officially (with the assistance of TTC staff at busy stops).

I must take issue with the proposed change of the Downtown Express routes to regular fare services. These routes, to be plain, exist mainly in response to “squeaky wheel” requests from Commission members rather than as a planned network across the city. There has never been a report on ridership or financial performance for these routes and they are not included in published route statistics. As peak-only services, they consume vehicles and operators who might be put to better use elsewhere in the system, but their relative productivity – something any ordinary route would have to show – has never been reviewed.

Network improvements

The concept of a core network is important because as a policy, it says that transit service will never be worse than a policy level on these routes. Toronto does this already on the rapid transit network where a 5 minute policy headway operates until nearly 2:00 am, and there is no reason this cannot be done on surface routes other than the will to fund the service.

The Blue Night network is certainly worth review to determine how well it serves all parts of the city especially those with recent growth in residential population.

All day, every day service would restore the network gaps created by service cuts of the past few years especially on weekend evenings.

Express services are worthwhile where the demand exists between a handful of locations on a route that can be better served with a limited-stop service. The difficult trade-off, however, comes with local service and riders who may now have wider headways at their stops. Ideally, express buses should be a valuable addition to a route, not be a service cut to many of its riders.

Common to these proposals is a consultation process so that changes to the network can occur where they are most needed and wanted.

Service improvements

Running better service by changing the loading standards will be an important reversal of a decision taken to meet budgetary targets. An important piece is missing here, however. How many routes are already beyond the standards (or soon will be) but cannot be improved thanks to an inadequate fleet? Service improvements planned in 2014 have already been delayed because resources are not available.

As I argued in my deputation on the CEO's report, this should not have to wait five years. The TTC needs a comprehensive plan to handle current demand, expected growth and the resources – buses, streetcars, garage space and operators – to make service more attractive.

Transit signal priority should be pursued much more aggressively in Toronto. Trade-offs will be needed between types of traffic because the movement patterns of buses and streetcars are different – they stop to serve passengers. There is simply not enough road capacity for everyone who wishes to travel (not to mention for those who park), and Council will have to decide on priorities. This should be based on local conditions with a recognition of different circumstances from area to area, street to street.

But road priority alone is not enough. Operating practices including scheduling and line management must ensure both reliability and evenly spaced service while also being realistic about actual conditions on roads. Schedules should reflect real travel times so that “line management” means more than constant short-turning. Convoys of vehicles separated by wide gaps should not be an accepted, day-to-day operating condition.

Funding

Transit policies – how much service we see, how much we will pay to ride, where new capital and operating spending will focus – these are decisions for the Commission and for Council. Some have argued that this report lacks a financial plan, some idea of how it will be funded, but that ignores the respective functions of management and the political bodies. Management says “here is what we need” and the politicians decide how (or if) they are willing to pay. This fall, we will see whether voters believe that starving transit for funding is a policy they will endorse.

I very strongly support the adoption of this report by the TTC as a commitment to being a truly “better way” for Toronto.