

Let's clear our heads and rethink this transit mess: James

Beginning today: a reality check on our "build something, anything" disaster in the making.



Among the solutions posed by various players in Toronto's ongoing transit saga, Vancouver's Skytrain technology, not unlike our SRT, is proposed as another option.

By: [Royson James](#) Toronto Politics, Published on Mon Jan 12 2015

Father, forgive me.

Over three decades of writing about transit in the Toronto region has landed me in a stupor, unable to give readers the straight goods on our transit needs.

One day, the subway demagogues beat me into submission and I want a subway to every corner of the metropolis.

The next day the LRT nerds kick sense into my brains and it is crystal clear that the Scarborough subway extension to McCowan and Sheppard is a colossal overbuild and egregious waste of money.

And just when I'm sufficiently conflicted, a third rail shows up to convince me that both approaches are stupidly inappropriate and, in fact, a Vancouver-style ALRT system (much like the Scarborough RT but greatly modernized) is the perfect solution.

For the price of your subscription you are supposed to get a clear, unassailable blueprint to transit Nirvana. I've failed. I must start again.

This time, I'll trust no one and be skeptical of all.

We can examine the evidence together. Some readers will curse at the morning paper as we smash sacred dogma and cherished positions. But maybe, together, as citizens who care about the mobility options we leave for our children, we'll examine the facts and confront them.

One thing we know, the politicians won't be much help. They can't. Hard wired to please, they seek out the solution most coveted by a majority of voters, even when the proposed answer in no way addresses the question.

We also know that the agencies (Metrolinx and TTC) and their bureaucrats, hired to inform the public discourse with truth and objective facts, have too often succumbed to the political wishes of their masters.

And, now, even the independent transit planners and engineers are infected by personal and corporate designs that threaten to poison the well of public opinion.

As a last line of defence — an arbiter of truth and a credible discernor of fact as opposed to fiction — the media have failed spectacularly. That's why I ask forgiveness.

Consider what is at stake. The public is very frustrated at road congestion. Commuters wonder why planners and politicians failed to prepare for the reality on the streets. They chafe at the perennial discussion and talk and lack of action. They are confused by the conflicting claims on all sides concerning the best solutions. And their desperate, dangerous conclusion is: "Build something, anything."

As such, we are about to make some colossal mistakes. Again. Price tag: tens of billions of dollars. And 25 years hence, our children and grandchildren will curse us in ways unimaginable today.

In the time I've been reporting on this file — since the mid-1980s — the TTC identified transit priorities, in order, as: the expansion of the Spadina-University line, followed by the Queen St. subway from around Weston in the west up through Thorncliffe and Flemingdon Park. Then, a line across Eglinton.

Somehow, Sheppard jumped the queue — to feed real estate interests. And, instead of properly wasting the money by building the line out to McCowan Rd. in Scarborough, the Stub-way to Don Mills has baffled everyone and left a bitter taste in our mouths.

Between the Bloor-Danforth line and Scarborough Centre, transit experts started building an LRT. Queen's Park intervened and ordered a new Ontario technology that would serve as a demonstration project to the world. The RT was born. A quarter of a century later, Vancouver's SkyTrain is making extensive use of the RT technology. And Toronto? We let our RT go to ruin, opted to return to LRT. And then, changed course and are about to overbuild with a subway.

Concurrently, our mayor has promised SmartTrack, a beguilingly appealing idea to mostly use existing GO tracks for a line stretching from Unionville to the airport region.

There are planners out there who will tell you that, using the modern upgrade of the very RT technology we are about to mothball, Toronto could save billions of dollars, move more cars off the road, and carry more transit passengers.

Some argue that Eglinton, Sheppard and the Scarborough subway should all use RT technology; that Finch West needs nothing more elaborate than a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) a la Highway 7; and that SmartTrack must be measured in light of the Downtown Relief Line (Queen Subway) and what appears to be duplication in the Scarborough-Markham section of SmartTrack and the Scarborough Subway extension..

Meanwhile, our citizens tell pollsters that, not only do they want to waste the billions already earmarked for the Sheppard Subway, they want to make it worse by adding another stop on the overbuilt corridor.

For the next year you can follow along in this space as we do a reality check and re-examine Toronto's transit plans.

I've been reading dispatches from international planners and transit consultants the likes of David Crowley, Bernhard Steglich, Michael Schabas, Ed Levy, Dick Soberman, and others. They are apoplectic — terrified at the mistakes we are about to make.

“Our plans don't match real needs on the street,” says Crowley, former transit planner with the TTC. “My fear? We are misallocating billions of dollars. Destination demand should drive our transit needs. It's not.”