

Easing traffic congestion may be most enduring Pan Am legacy

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The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Jul. 16, 2015 9:15PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jul. 17, 2015 8:51AM EDT

When people talk about the legacy of the Pan Am Games, they usually mention the airport train, the athletes' village or the velodrome. But the most profound effect may be lasting changes to how people move around the Toronto area.

New operational tactics have been rolled out to deal with hundreds of thousands of spectators travelling to venues spread wide across the region. They are often small things, but they will make the system operate more smoothly long after the athletes have left.

Police are clearing collisions faster. The TTC has trained 1,600 of its employees as games "ambassadors," a pool of talent that can be tapped to assist during future problems on the system. The patchwork of transit agencies across the region is working together more.

But the biggest shift may be in how people choose to travel.

Games organizers went in with the goal of reducing traffic volume, urging people to alter their commuting patterns, switch to transit or team up to whisk past traffic in the 235 kilometres of temporary high occupancy vehicle lanes, mostly on the 400-series and Toronto highways.

Although the provincial Ministry of Transportation will not reveal its traffic data, and official transit ridership numbers for the past few weeks are not yet available, early signs indicate this approach is paying off.

The regional transit agency, Metrolinx, is putting on hundreds of extra trains and buses, some to carry spectators, but others to meet increased demand. After early hiccups – 12 collisions the morning the HOV lanes took effect, police said, many more than normal – carpooling and ride-matching services are reporting big spikes in interest.

Even though these changes to how people move are tied to the event, the evidence from elsewhere indicates some will become permanent.

A report from Transport for London found that 35 per cent of travellers changed the timing, route or mode of their trip on the average weekday during the 2012 Olympics there. And 15 per cent of those who made a change continued with it.

In a clogged transportation system, little shifts can make a meaningful difference.

“Relatively small reductions in number of vehicles can actually make real improvements in terms of how traffic flows,” said Matti Siemiatycki, an associate professor of geography and planning at the University of Toronto. “In many cases, what we need is to find ways to shift relatively small numbers of people.”

In one example of how it can be done differently, transit buses using the temporary HOV lanes often are running 20 to 40 minutes ahead of schedule. For riders, it is a glimpse of how fast and reliable surface transportation can be – offering a real alternative – if it does not have to compete with other traffic. Even something as simple as a new app that allows people to plan their trip across municipal boundaries is being praised for breaking new ground in co-operation among the area’s transit providers.

“That was probably one of the first and biggest projects that brought all of the transit agencies to the same table to work together,” Metrolinx spokeswoman Anne Marie Aikins said.

“I think it paves the way for the future, because there are other things coming forward, like fare integration, that’s going to require the same kind of thinking and the same kind of co-operation.”

The biggest takeaway so far of the Games, though, seems to be evidence that in Toronto, as elsewhere, at least some of the traffic is discretionary. Although some people have to drive a set route at a set time, others do not.

“One thing we’ve learned is that, a), our transportation system is packed to the gills, but, b), under the right conditions, people will change their behaviour,” Dr. Siemiatycki said.

“We have this sense that we’re not going to change. We’re Toronto, and what happened elsewhere is elsewhere, this is the way we are, love us or don’t. And I think that viewpoint is being challenged.”

Some caution that commuters’ behaviour over the long term remains to be seen. But others say the moment should be seized, that behaviour is difficult to change and this is too good an opportunity to waste.

And the seeming flexibility of commuters has prompted calls for a conversation about putting a price on driving. Many transportation experts say this is the most reliable way to manage congestion.

“You can add transit to your heart’s content,” said Murtaza Haider, director of the Institute of Housing and Mobility at Ryerson University. “There’s demand for much more travel than we can cater for now and the only way to deal with it is tolling.”

Another option is the provincial gas tax, which has not increased since the early 1990s.

“If you raise the gas tax, it means people drive less,” said Harry Kitchen, an economics professor emeritus at Trent University, who issued a report this week calling for an increase of eight cents per litre in the tax. “The evidence that’s been collected so far says, yes, it will have an impact.”

Dr. Kitchen said the timing of his report, done for the **Residential & Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario**, was coincidental to the Pan Am Games. But he added that the event could persuade the region to tackle traffic differently.

“I think to get change ... sometimes you need a fairly dramatic event,” he said. “And maybe this is one.”