



THE HILL TIMES

Local transit, federal lessons

The federal Liberal government plans to spend \$11.6-billion on infrastructure over the next five years. Experts say it's an opportunity for federal legislators to learn from the upheaval in places like the Greater Toronto Area in order to ensure that politics doesn't trump sound infrastructure investments.



'There's always a preponderance for governments to want to fund expansion projects so that you can cut that ribbon, show that new line on a map. While that's really important ... the piece that is always forgotten, which is fairly less sexy, is the state of good repair and maintenance and ongoing upkeep of these systems,' says Toronto city councillor and Toronto Transit Commission chair Josh Colle. *Toronto Star* photograph by Tara Walton

By MARCO VIGLIOTTI

PUBLISHED : Wednesday, April 20, 2016 12:00 AM

Plastered along temporary blockades, meant to blunt the intrusion of hectic worksites, sleek, boldface font posters advertise the benefits commuters will soon enjoy from the currently under-construction light rail line set to stretch across Toronto's main east-west thoroughway.

Slated to open in 2021, the \$5.3-billion Eglinton Crosstown remains on pace to close out what critics have assailed as the lost decade of transit in the city following the completion of the Sheppard subway in 2002.

Since that time, Toronto has failed to add a single kilometre to its rapid transit system despite welcoming more than a million new residents to the broader metro area, stoking widespread commuter frustration at increasingly swamped roadways and packed subway trains.

But after years of intransigence, route battles and political squabbles, the Greater Toronto Area is currently awash in makeshift fencing and hardhats as the provincial government charges ahead on a sweeping overhaul of regional transportation infrastructure, envisioning an ambitious plan for commuter train service GO Transit and financing expansions to Toronto's teeming subway system.

The federal Liberals are also targeting the region for new investments, with the GTA expected to reap the lion's share of an additional \$20-billion earmarked for national transit infrastructure over the next decade.

In the Liberals' first budget, tabled in the House of Commons in March, the government pledged \$11.6-billion in new infrastructure spending over the next five years, framing it as the first section of a two-phased scheme to push out an additional \$60-billion in the next decade.

Public transit was allocated \$3.4-billion over five years, with the province of Ontario set to receive roughly \$1.5-billion of that total. Although specifics were sparse, the federal budget mentions fleet replacement for the Toronto Transit Commission, hinting at potentially new subway trains, buses or street cars.

The Liberals also promised to cover up to 50 per cent of the costs for certain infrastructure projects, as opposed to the more conventional three-way split between Ottawa, the provinces and the municipalities.

But transit experts warn that the new federal government must demand greater accountability from municipal and provincial partners to ensure politics does not trump thorough research in setting infrastructure priorities and squander this historic opportunity to reinvent an exhausted transportation grid.

"The good news is our decision-makers have recognized that we missed a generation of infrastructure and there's a dramatic need to start building," says Matti Siemiatycki, a geography professor at the University of Toronto specializing in transit policy. "The question is now that you have the recognition, what do you actually spend money on? On that front, that's where this region has really had challenges over the years."

Founded in 2006, provincial Crown agency Metrolinx has taken the lead in coordinating and managing mass transit developments across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

The guiding blueprint for the agency has been the Big Move, an overarching regional transportation strategy adopted in 2008 that lays out plans to spend \$2-billion annually on transit projects—including building 1,200 kilometres of rapid transit—over the next 25 years.

Metrolinx is actively laying the groundwork for the centerpiece of the strategy: an ambitious regional express rail scheme that would see electric trains run every 15 minutes or less across the most heavily travelled sections of the GO system to replace the relatively sluggish service offered by its conventional diesel powered fleet.

‘The good news is our decision-makers have recognized that we missed a generation of infrastructure and there’s a dramatic need to start building.’

—*Matti Siemiatycki*

It is also managing construction of new additions to the Toronto rapid transit system, continuing to direct the sweeping renovations of historic Union Station and providing financing to countless other projects, while operating the recently completed express train connecting downtown Toronto to the airport.

Bruce McCuaig, Metrolinx president and chief executive officer, says he believes the agency’s efforts will “change the way people move around this region,” citing specifically the ongoing overhaul of GO Transit from a primarily rush-hour service into a two-way, all-day commuter line.

“We need to have a transit system that reflects the complexity of the urban region that we have in the Toronto area,” he says, calling the regional express rail plan for GO, set to take shape over the next five to 10 years, the “most significant expansion of the system” since its inception in 1967.

The spate of new projects is also indicative of changes in regional planning priorities, Mr. McCuaig says, with Metrolinx now working on integrating the various employment and residential hubs across the GTA instead of merely connecting downtown Toronto with the suburbs.

He credits the provincial Liberals, regional stakeholders and residents for supporting these historic investments to reinvent transit in the area.

“We’re blessed right now in this region of having governments that are very much aligned with the need to invest and build our transportation services,” Mr. McCuaig says.

Long relegated as a provincial and local issue, transit funding roared into the national consciousness during the 2015 federal election campaign as the three major parties all touted expensive plans to invest in municipal infrastructure.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau toured the New Flyer manufacturing plant in Winnipeg, Man., in February 2015. In its first budget, the Liberal government promised \$11.6-billion in new infrastructure spending over the next five years, framing it as the first section of a two-phased scheme to push out an additional \$60-billion in the next decade. Photograph courtesy PMO

The federal Liberals promised to quadruple existing municipal transit funding in the next decade and were awarded with huge seat gains in each of the country's largest metro areas.

Mr. Siemiatycki advises the federal government to avoid spending lavishly on transit projects that appear politically lucrative but lack solid business cases, warning that with billions on the table, the margin of error will be razor thin.

The failure, he says, to reap the promised ridership and congestion alleviation benefits from these costly projects could erode public trust and support for years—potentially pulling the region back into the transit stasis of the past decade.

“The real risk in the big picture is we’re going to lose the public confidence and trust in the abilities of governments to select projects and solve real problems,” Mr. Siemiatycki says. “It’s a long-term risk for our infrastructure at a time when we know we have to be spending.”

While provincial and federal governments typically fork over capital funding for construction, Mr. Siemiatycki cautions that the far more onerous annual operation costs fall on the laps of municipal authorities, meaning poor investments can hamstring transit providers for decades.

The 5.5-kilometre Sheppard subway draws so few riders it is estimated to require a roughly \$10 per ride operating subsidy, which has cooled local politicians on future expansion plans, according to the *Toronto Star*.

Frustrating commuters in the region could also have major political consequences for both the provincial and federal Liberals, who largely owe their recent electoral success to strong showings in the 416 and 905 region.

The federal Grits swept every riding in Toronto, Brampton and Mississauga in last year's election, while their provincial counterparts won all but three seats in those cities in 2014.

To prevent unwise investments, Mr. Siemiatycki calls on Ottawa to establish an "infrastructure bank" that would set clear and concrete standards for any project vying for money from the federal government as opposed to continuing to distribute funding on an ad-hoc basis.

The idea is that clearly-defined rules would reduce political influence in transit funding procurement, while still maintaining the exclusive authority for the municipalities and provinces to set infrastructure priorities.

"The challenge here is when these ... technical processes abut with political considerations," Mr. Siemiatycki explains, arguing that the politicization of transit in the Toronto region has often led to technical evidence being disregarded or completed far too hastily.

University of Toronto economics professor Jonathan Hall also underscores the importance of reducing political interference in setting transit priorities, expressing disappointment with the limited role technocratic expertise currently plays in the procurement process.

In the United States, he says proponents must justify that their infrastructure proposals are credible investments in order to receive federal funding, but notes the same requirement does not exist north of the border.

"That means sometimes we fund incredibly expensive political giveaways," Mr. Hall says, citing the Scarborough subway line that opened in 1985 and has struggled since to attract strong ridership.

He says the subway was not the "best idea" and predicts it "would not have happened in a U.S.-type system," but refuses to outright dismiss it as a giveaway.



Alberta Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Brian Mason, federal Infrastructure Minister Amarjeet Sohi and Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson announced in Edmonton Dec. 21, 2015, the completion of the Queen Elizabeth II Highway and 41 Avenue Southwest Intermodal Access project. The \$205-million project was completed on time and on budget. The Government of Canada contributed up to \$75-million through the Asia-Pacific Gateway and Corridor Transportation Infrastructure Fund. The Province of Alberta invested \$57.5-million and the City of Edmonton provided \$72.5-million. Photograph by Chris Schwarz, Government of Alberta

The future of the Scarborough line had been debated intermittently for more than a decade by city politicians before Premier Wynne said in 2013 her government would fund an extension of the Bloor-Danforth subway route that would replace current rapid transit service in the area and lead to the eventual closure of the line.

Jennifer Moritsugu, a spokesperson for Infrastructure Canada, tells *P&I* in a statement that the federal government is committed to working closely with other levels of government to develop the details of its 10-year infrastructure investment plan.

“As we begin to invest in infrastructure, we also propose to make investments that can enhance municipal planning, asset management, and data collection capacity,” she says, noting that more details would be released in the coming months.

“This will help all orders of government make evidence-based decisions and put us on a more sustainable path,” she adds.

Toronto Transit Commission chair and Toronto city councillor Josh Colle agrees the infrastructure bank proposal could be good, saying transit projects in the city would easily pass any assessment because of strong anticipated ridership numbers.

But he stresses that municipalities should remain the sole arbiters of local funding priorities, warning the federal government could no longer expect local politicians to fall in line with the priorities etched out in the nation's capital.

"The days of the federal government imposing its will and saying 'this is a project we like for our political reasons' and then we kind of go along with it, is not effective," Mr. Colle says.

While conceding that a "certain amount of rigour" should be expected from municipalities when pitching projects to the federal government, he argues politics, not necessity, frequently determines the scope of participation from Ottawa.

According to Mr. Colle, federal governments have historically chosen to fund splashy new projects over "critical" upgrades to existing infrastructure, a concerning trend with the Toronto rapid transit system beginning to show its age after more than 60 years in operation.

"There's always a preponderance for governments to want to fund expansion projects so that you can cut that ribbon, show that new line on a map," he says. "While that's really important ... the piece that is always forgotten, which is fairly less sexy, is the state of good repair and maintenance and ongoing upkeep of these systems."

Despite these shortcomings, Mr. Colle expresses optimism about Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's promise to embark on a new era of intergovernmental relations by affording the provinces, territories and municipalities greater authority in setting infrastructure priorities.

Heralding this call, Mr. Colle says local governments should assume more prominent roles in the funding conversation as the burden to prove the merits of their infrastructure proposals ultimately rests with the municipalities.

"There's always going to be a certain political element of it. That's what we're supposed to do [as elected officials]. What's needed, though ... is letting local municipalities, local communities make those decisions of what those priorities are," Mr. Colle says. "It then becomes incumbent on those municipalities to have a more rational, defensible set of reasons of why a project is a priority."