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Transit needs “leadership with teeth,” ex-TTC chief says

Problems require “well-coordinated frontal attack,” says David Gunn

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Directed and efficient construction of new transportation solutions for the Greater Toronto Area requires “leadership with teeth,” says a former Toronto Transit Commission chief.

“There has not been a well-coordinated frontal attack to transit solutions,” says David Gunn, former chief general manager of the TTC. “What is the goal? What are we trying to do? At times it all appears to be driven by people putting up their pet projects.”

Gunn recently made a candid presentation at a transportation seminar organized by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario. Gunn is now retired, but his transportation management experiences include New York, Washington and even a three-year stint as president of Amtrak.

“The issue of co-ordination is vital,” Gunn says. “You need some agency that has the ability to allocate those scarce [TTC] resources.”

Gunn took aim at the TTC’s \$6 billion Transit City Plan which would result in seven new light rail lines being built across the city. Construction work could begin as early as 2009, on either the Etobicoke-Finch West line or the Sheppard East line, as preliminary studies have already been completed for these components of the plan.

“There is an air of unreality right now — you need someone keeping everybody honest,” says Gunn. “There needs to be an agency saying ‘these are the options.’ ”

The fact Transit City has not really explored possible technology options for its proposed lines, which, in Gunn’s estimation, proves that a “top down” approach has driven this plan.

“There has been a blurring of lines between management and politicians [at the TTC],” says

Gunn. "Rail is sexy but you want to choose the right technology. People are making modal choices before they should."

The former TTC chief admits he is not fully aware of the current work started by Metrolinx, the new name for the former Greater Toronto Transportation Authority. Gunn said he hopes the organization has the ability to not just look at "what is new".

"There need to be realistic estimates of projects and the capital costs to build," says Gunn. "Someone also needs to look at the state of good repair and needs for the current system."

The last provincial budget included \$497 million for Greater Toronto Area and Hamilton transit improvements. In the budget, the Liberals endorsed key projects identified by Metrolinx, including upgrading GO rail tracks and signalling system on the Yonge Street subway, as well as developing bus rapid transit lines across the region.