

## **Keep politicians out of transit systems operations: expert**

### **Soberman delivers report on improving area transit**

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Better customer service, expert oversight and possibly money from road tolls are just as important as new bus and light rail routes when it comes to making a viable public transit network across the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA), according to a report by noted transportation expert Dr. Richard Soberman.

"The message is that if you build it, don't assume they will come," said Soberman on Thursday, Nov. 18, as he presented his report, *Delivering Transit Service in the GTHA: Where We Are Is Not Where We Want To End Up*.

Soberman has a long history with the Toronto Transit Commission and transit planning. He has presented the commission with advice on matters such as how to rehabilitate the Scarborough RT, and what went wrong with the St. Clair streetcar right-of-way.

He wrote this report for the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Toronto, and in it he lays out a plan for creating the kind of transit system across the GTHA that will coax the region's growing population out of their cars.

The heavy-lifting part of that job has already been done, he argued, through the provincial Big Move transit plan that is expected to see \$16 billion in transit investment pumped into the region over the next decade.

"This report really started out on the premise that the object of planning is to do the right things right," he said. "Well people who are much smarter than me and with a lot more money than me have decided what's right."

Now, he said, the challenge is to find ways to operate and fund the new system so that the new lines will do the job. He pointed out that the Sheppard subway line as it sits only carries 4,500 passengers an hour. That number is less than the Queen streetcar line downtown, and a tenth of the ridership on the Yonge-University subway line.

Currently, Metrolinx is projecting a 132 per cent increase in transit ridership over the next 25 years. But over the past 25 years, transit ridership has only increased by 15 per cent - despite the fact that population has increased at the same rate over both periods.

"So the question is how do you get from 15 per cent to 132 per cent," Soberman said. "You can't do that, unless you can somehow cause people to change the way they travel."

He presented a three-tiered strategy to achieve that: First, improve customer service - then find a way to consistently finance the new system - and finally, change the way that transit is governed so that elected politicians are kept as far away from the day-to-day operations as possible.

Customer service, he said, has to become the *raison-d'etre* for transit organizations and the corporate culture has to maintain that focus from the top down.

He also said that elected politicians should not be serving on boards overseeing transit organizations. Rather, oversight should be made up of expert appointees, nominated by both government and key organizations in the community.

And they should be brought on for their specific expertise.

"It would be nice to have someone on these boards who actually brought something to the party," Soberman said. "You won't find that in a board that's made up of elected officials."

And finally, he said transit needs a new model of funding. Transit organizations should be able to use guaranteed funding as a way to incur debt - and some of that funding could well come from road pricing, or tolls.

He said the option was attractive - but it had to be a system that metered road use overall.

"If you're going to toll Hwy. 404 or the Gardiner Expressway, one of three things is going to happen," Soberman said. "They're going to infiltrate neighbourhoods, they're going to just go somewhere else, or they'll pay it - but they won't do it for long. The only way of doing road pricing is road pricing that meters use - or a surcharge on fuel."