

Take Politics out of Transit Planning

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Last year, the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario commissioned [a four-part video series](#) that has had an impact on conversations around the GTA, focusing on the need to minimize political interference in transit planning. Once a viable plan has been arrived at through evidence-based decision-making, however, the videos emphasize the need to maximize political support for the approved plans.

Prime examples of political interference cited in the videos include:

- former premier Mike Harris’s cancellation of the just under construction Eglinton subway 20 years ago and how then-North York mayor Mel Lastman successfully lobbied to have the Sheppard subway built instead; and
- former Toronto mayor Rob Ford killing predecessor David Miller’s Transit City plan, including the Sheppard LRT project in Scarborough in 2010.

Transit historian Ed Levy, in his book *Rapid Transit in Toronto: A Century of Plans, Progress, Politics and Paralysis*, has written about many worthy projects that have been proposed in the last 100 years but abandoned for various reasons. Mr. Levy, for example, is adamant that a regional relief line (also referred to as a downtown relief line) is a critical project which will provide options for suburban commuters and take pressure off the Yonge and Bloor lines as well as the highly congested Union Station hub. Andy Byford, the widely respected chief general manager of the TTC, openly concurs with this opinion.

So, while reading Greg Sorbara’s recently released book about his life in politics, it is noteworthy that there is a sub-chapter called “The York Subway Saga” as it substantiates the “political interference” theme. The well-written work starts out in 1986 with the newly elected MPP “with a dream” drawing a line on a map from the terminus of the University-Spadina subway at Wilson Station to York University—at the border of Toronto and Vaughan—for his colleague Ed Fulton, who was the transportation minister. Over his career, Mr. Sorbara has proven that he is one of the most astute politicians around and clearly the former finance minister recognizes that “the politics of transit in Toronto can best be described as a comedy of errors.”

So far so good.

But one statement that perplexed me appears just prior to his “comedy of errors” point. Sorbara writes that when Bob Rae became premier in 1990, he was “entitled” to make Eglinton the top subway priority because “priorities change when governments change.” By this logic, both the Harris and Ford examples above are acceptable political interventions.

Even if Eglinton had more merit than the Spadina subway extension, that’s a damning indictment of the planning process for transit. Why should public transit be any different from any other critical infrastructure? Do we ever hear a politician say, I think this trunk sewer line should go here instead of here? No, because politicians generally don’t have the engineering or operational expertise to make such decisions.

It would have helped if Mr. Sorbara had added the caveat that priorities are guided by the best evidence provided by transportation specialists, and that government decision-makers weigh that evidence based on political realities.

Let’s look at the “Transit City” Light Rail Transit plan of 2007. It had a number of good attributes such as building a wider network across the entire city at a lower cost per kilometre than subway expansion. But if it had been built, it would have added more ridership to already crowded subway lines, principally because Transit City lacked any consideration of a U-shaped link through Toronto’s financial district (Canada’s largest focus of employment by far). This relief line would take pressure off of stations such as Bloor-Yonge by intersecting with east and west legs of the Bloor-Danforth subway.

In addition, Mr. Miller was not enamoured with the prospect of building the Spadina subway extension as it did not fit into his LRT plans. On this subject, Mr. Sorbara makes another jaw-dropping statement by writing that Mayor Miller “should have been thrilled at the prospect of the province providing \$670 million for more subway infrastructure, *regardless of where it went.*” [emphasis added.] This is like saying you have a certain amount of money to either make a mortgage payment, or top up your RRSP—it really doesn’t matter where the money goes.

Sorbara also provides a behind-the-scenes look at the horse trading that took place with federal finance minister Jim Flaherty. Flaherty wanted a commitment for provincial funding of the Highway 407 East extension through his riding in exchange for federal funding support of the Spadina subway extension.

A little later in the book, Mr. Sorbara makes a number of astute observations about the importance of being a team player in party politics. He is, of course, correct by commenting that the 2011 Liberal provincial candidate Sarah Thomson “freelanced on policy” by advocating for a subway under Queen Street but is doubly wrong in the following statement: “First, it’s almost impossible to build a subway under Queen Street. Second, of all the ridings in Ontario, which one do you think already has the greatest concentration of public transit? Yes, Trinity-Spadina.”

From an engineering perspective, it is possible to build a subway under Queen Street and/or other east-west streets such as Adelaide, King or Wellington Streets through the financial district. And, if one cares to consult with transit gurus such as Ed Levy or Richard Soberman, such a subway would make perfectly good sense to relieve overcrowding on the current subway lines. The question is not whether a particular area already has a high concentration of public transit, it is whether the existing transit infrastructure is well used and, if so, whether that area should be served by more higher order transit.

Our video series demonstrates that despite how well-meaning politicians might be in their transit interventions, time and time again, a personal agenda is pushed through with little consideration for the evidence-based input of transit professionals who, increasingly it seems, are forced to accommodate the political aspirations, often by agreeing to downplay or suppress selected drawbacks of particular proposals.

Toronto faces another excruciatingly difficult dilemma right now. Studies are being done on a regional express rail service, aka SmartTrack. There is a lot of political momentum for this project but is it really the best solution now? Certainly the proposal, referred to as a “surface subway”, appears to offer capital cost savings which are appealing compared to other options. There would be some tunnelling in the west end that, while introducing a cost penalty, is not insurmountable. The line is, however, very close to the existing Scarborough Rapid Transit line where a subway has been proposed to replace it. Will the transit professionals be permitted to demonstrate that ridership might be cannibalized with these two corridors so close together?

In a constrained fiscal environment, it is exceedingly important that each \$1 billion in potential transit investment be spent on projects that will provide the best outcomes. It is essential that we don't get locked into transit projects because of certain political assumptions and promises.

With proper foresight, the studies on the below ground regional relief line (Ed Levy's priority), SmartTrack and Scarborough RT revitalization will be interlinked in terms of recognition of different options for mode, alignment and other key variables. Will our decision-makers have the political maturity to accept the findings and back down from their preconceived notions if the best evidence points to a different plan?

As University of Toronto professor emeritus Richard Soberman has said: “Politicians should make decisions on policies, objectives and plans developed by the professionals and then complete their responsibilities by ensuring that the required long term funding is available to both build and operate the planned rapid transit facilities. Leave the details regarding technologies, station locations and alignments to the professional planners and engineers.”

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