

Liberal budget offers no new specifics on Toronto transit

Only about \$1 billion remains in the coming decade for a relief subway, Yonge line extension and regional bus rapid transit.



Keith Beaty / Toronto Star file photo

Much of the \$16 billion earmarked for the GTA will go to projects in the surrounding municipalities and previously planned projects like the Finch LRT, not to the hoped-for downtown relief line or a Yonge line extension to match the Spadina one, pictured here.

By: [Tess Kalinowski](#) Transportation reporter, Published on Thu Apr 23 2015

Toronto transit watchers hoping for some surprise commitment to a relief subway or more TTC service didn't find any treats in Thursday's provincial budget.

"This is supposed to be a transit budget, but there's no money for improving service now. There's nothing in there for Toronto transit riders," said Jessica Bell of TTCriders, a group that has lobbied for more TTC funding.

Regional rail investments for GO and Mayor John Tory ([open John Tory's polycard](#))'s SmartTrack will help in the future, but the budget doesn't provide any assistance to 1.8 million TTC riders who are already squished into Toronto subways, buses and streetcars, she said.

The provincial budget designates \$31.5 billion for provincial transportation over the next 10 years, including \$16 billion for the Toronto region. Most of that is earmarked for the surrounding 905-area municipalities.

Before the budget, the Liberal government announced that \$1.6 billion will pay for the Hurontario-Main LRT linking Mississauga and Brampton. But the majority of the funds — \$13.5 billion — are designated for GO Transit's regional express rail expansion, funding the province says will also mesh with Toronto Mayor John Tory's SmartTrack plan to move city commuters on electrified Kitchener and Stouffville GO lines.

The budget notes, however, that if his plan is to go ahead, the city and federal governments will need to come up with an additional \$5.2 billion to build additional stations and a SmartTrack spur along Eglinton Ave. to the airport area.

That didn't discourage Tory. He called it "a big and important week for transit in Toronto."

"Today, we had further confirmation of the province's commitment to SmartTrack," he said, although it remains unclear whether that constitutes a full one-third share of Tory's \$8-billion plan.

"We'll talk about that as time goes on," he said. "I am very happy that the math they've set out in their own budget documents specifically contemplates that what they say they're going to do amounts to \$2.8 billion."

Tory said he plans to sit down with the province this year to discuss the reforms needed to make tax increment financing feasible for this project.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa brushed aside questions about the lack of new money for 416-area commuters.

"We have, in the budget, timelines of many projects that we're doing right across Ontario. We have a number that are shovel-ready right now and many others we'll proceed with. It's something all levels of government have to participate in, including the federal government. I was hoping for more on that score," he told reporters.

After the GO expansion and the Hurontario-Main LRT, the budget appears to leave only about \$1 billion to be shared between bus rapid transit projects in Durham, Peel and Halton regions; a northern extension of the Yonge subway to Richmond Hill; and a much-anticipated rapid transit project in Hamilton. It almost certainly won't be enough to put shovels in the ground on any of those.

The \$16 billion in new regional transit is in addition to previous commitments, including construction of LRTs on Finch and Sheppard in Toronto, expected to cost about \$1 billion each; the \$5.3-billion Eglinton Crosstown LRT; the \$1.4-billion York Region Viva bus rapid transit; the \$560-million Union Pearson Express and the \$113-million provincial contribution to the Mississauga transitway.

Despite pre-budget suggestions that it might be time for the provincial Liberals to reopen the hot-button topic of new revenue tools for transit, there was no mention of new funding mechanisms beyond the sale of public assets, including shares of Hydro One.

“We want to go after and ensure we’re maximizing our revenues from the existing tax base that we have,” said Sousa.

The budget document urged municipalities to consider similar “asset optimization” to help with GO improvements such as flood mitigation on the Richmond Hill GO line, and Toronto infrastructure.

It was the third consecutive provincial budget to suggest that high occupancy toll (HOT) lanes could raise new revenue for transportation. But the province has yet to launch even a pilot of such lanes, which allow drivers travelling alone to pay a toll to make use of high-occupancy vehicle lanes.