



## Could zoned transit work in Toronto?

Staggered fare scale works in Vancouver, but Toronto faces a different set of geographic (and social) challenges

By Todd Aalgaard

We're doing it wrong. At least according to a report published late last month.

Commissioned by the [Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario \(RCCAO\)](#), the report was a joint study between the departments of economics and business at Trent and UBC, respectively. Recognizing the Toronto to Hamilton corridor as the nation's economic engine, its conclusions specified the "availability and quality of efficient public transit and road systems" as essential to that engine's healthy, sustained operations.

Totaling 116 pages, it was remarkable how its contents surprised absolutely nobody.

The report's indictments went beyond just the function or efficiency of Toronto-area transit -or the lack thereof, as the case may be. It pointed to the price tag looming over the upgrades and overhauls needed to keep Ontario's system running, with another accusatory finger aimed at the province's ever-dwindling coffers. "There is a large gap between the funds available and the costs of financing and funding these plans," the report stated. "New sources of revenue will be necessary."

Six remedial recommendations were made, advising a regional fuel tax, parking tax, vehicle levies, modernized toll systems and changes to parking fees based on vehicle occupancy. What really jumped from the newsprint over the last week, however, was a recommendation to re-jig transit fares, calculating them by time of use and distance traveled.

The use of a "zonal scheme," the report said, is a superior alternative to Toronto's existing fare regime - especially when it comes to issues grudgingly familiar to Torontonians. Flat fares "[encourage] urban sprawl because people can live far from work and commute by transit at low fares" and "also discourage people from using transit for short trips, and this low demand makes it difficult to justify expanding service to nearby suburbs."

Without a staggered fare scale, we're leaning heavily on a weary system, leaving a huge, tangled infrastructure mess behind us as we traverse the city. And without raising the cost of a ride at peak hours, the suggestion continues, Ontario is funneling revenue down a black hole to nowhere in the name of maintaining this infrastructure.

So could such a zoning scheme actually work in Toronto?

Functionally, at any rate, it seems to work just fine in at least one other Canadian metropolis. At first glance, Vancouver doesn't seem like the sort of place to have already rolled out this system. With its back resting against the Coast Mountains, the city feels smaller, less sprawling than ours. But like London, England, Vancouver has zoned its transit for years.

There are four zones in all, radiating outward from the city's center, starting with Zone 1 at the University of British Columbia and the condo-dotted vicinity of downtown. Zone 2 starts at the boundary between Vancouver and Burnaby. Elsewhere, its boundaries are north of Burrard Inlet, encompassing the affluent neighbourhoods of North and West Vancouver, or south of the Fraser River. Venturing beyond Burnaby, North Vancouver and Richmond, travelers enter Zone 3. This includes the outlying communities of Maple Ridge, White Rock, Delta, Langley, and others.

Stay within a single zone, it's \$2.74; cross two zones, \$4.00; all three, it's \$5.50. Instead of a token or a cash fare, a ticket is purchased with a timestamp, read by a Presto-like machine. From the start of your journey, you have ninety minutes until your ticket is no longer valid.

Where Vancouver's system most closely mirrors the RCCAO's proposal to Toronto, evidently, is in scheduling. From the moment the first SkyTrain runs on a weekday until 6:30 pm, the zone system is strictly enforced, transit police and all. Otherwise, from 6:30 until the last bus, train, or SeaBus - or on weekends or holidays - all of TransLink's network is considered the same zone. "Transit fares," the RCCAO similarly recommended, "should be based on distance traveled and time of use."

It's simple enough to envision such a radial re-organizing of Toronto's map. The question of whether it could work locally hinges less on the technical implementation, it could be argued, and more on the social.

What's unique about Vancouver is the city's natural geography, with Zone 2 physically separated from Zone 1 by the Burrard Inlet, with Zone 3 comprising characteristically different cities than that of Vancouver proper, and so on. On the other hand, as much as it's a city of neighbourhoods, Toronto is also something of an urban melting pot. Here, we don't have natural boundaries in the landscape to demarcate economic boundaries in transit. It will arguably be much harder to bring such a system to Toronto without sowing actual divisions, particularly with much of the city's poor in areas potentially affected by a fare increase.

But as comments even among Vancouver residents indicate, the social justice undercurrent to this proposed solution may be a terrible inevitability.

"By charging people commuting to or from Surrey twice as much to use the interconnected transit system, we are, in effect, penalizing the very people we should be helping," said Barbara Docherty, responding to recent fare hikes in the B.C. Lower Mainland.

"Our thinking about public transit needs to be turned on its head."